

Furrows in the Snow



A part of Kabul city in winter

FURROWS IN THE SNOW

Narenderpal Singh

VIDYA PRAKASHAN BHAWAN
Ramjas Road, New Delhi-5

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to
the people of afghanistan

The author

Narenderpal Singh was born on 17 Oct. 1923 at Kania Bunglow, district Lyallpur, in West Pakistan. He graduated from the Sikh National College, Lahore, in 1942. In the same year he was commissioned in the Sikh Light Infantry.

During World war II he served in the West Asia. He was in Jammu and Kashmir from 1947 to 1949. In 1953 he was transferred to the Army Ordnance Corps and attended the seventh Staff College Course at Wellington. Later he was the Indian Military Attache at Kabul, Afghanistan for over three years. At present he is the Comptroller of the Household of the President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan

Narenderpal Singh is one of the foremost Punjabi novelists. He has handled a variety of themes—modern and historical. He is one of the few poets in India who writes in vers-libre. He has travelled widely and is a linguist. His major contribution consists of a quartette of novels dealing with the history of the Punjab from the rise of Banda Singh Bahadur in 1710 to the final annexation of the State by the British in 1849. This period is one of the stormiest in the history of India encompassing as it does the rise and fall of the valiant, though short-lived, Sikh Empire. For the first time in the Indian languages a novelist has dared to paint so large a canvas. He is a prolific writer and is the author of over twenty-five literary works including novel, essay, travelogue and poetry.

Afghanistan

The land of wild beauty and grandeur and of extraordinarily virile and most hospitable people. The high mountains are perpetually snow-bound and about half of the country is under the blanket of snow for six months in a year. The rest of the country is an arid desert. But the furrows are appearing in the snow. The deserts are turning green.

Was this the land of the Aryans? Perhaps. Anyway the Afghans are now proud of their Aryan descent. The names of their young girls, of their industrial undertakings, of their newspapers and magazines or of their airlines start with the word, Aryana.

Most great men of history have braved the snows and deserts of this land. Alexander the Great, the Great Kanishka, Chengiz Khan, Timur the Lame, Babur, Nadir Shah. The Mother of Cities, Balkh is in its north. Bamian is the sublimest relic of Buddhism in the world. Kabul and Kandhar have been the famous centres of Buddhist and Greek art and culture. Herat represents the pristine Turco-Iranian civilisation.

Every stone here is a witness to the great historical events. Every blade of grass has an interesting tale to tell. This is Afghanistan. Aryana.

FOREWORD

by

Prof. HUMAYUN KABIR

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I have read with interest Col. Narenderpal Singh's account of his travels in Afghanistan. As a soldier, he has a keen eye for detail. As a writer and poet, he has a feeling for beauty. He has obviously great sympathy for the people and this has enabled him to identify himself with their attitude and outlook. The combination makes for an interesting account of one of the most interesting peoples of Asia.

In ancient and medieval times Indians were great travellers and there are many interesting and imaginative accounts of what they saw in other lands. There followed a period when the spirit of adventure seems to have died out in India. This was also a period of political and economic set-back and disappointments. As national spirit revived, interest in the world outside also increased. After independence, it is natural that this increase in interest should be even more marked.

Afghanistan is one of our closest neighbours. Through it have moved some of the greatest migrations in human history and left their mark on the land and the people. The men have the rugged strength of its mountains and have always fought for their independent way of life. The women have remained secluded and sheltered, but like its sheltered valleys, brought beauty and grace to life. Today, men and women are engaged in a great cooperative effort at reconstruction of national life.

For long centuries, India and Afghanistan had a common history and their civilisation and culture have many common elements. In spite of close geographical, historical and cultural affinities, we have to admit that we do not yet know enough about one another. In the fast shrinking world of today, greater knowledge about other countries and especially our neighbours is necessary for peace, prosperity and progress. I welcome this travelogue of Col. Singh and the more so as it deals with the friendly people of a neighbouring country with whom we have many common memories.

Humayun Kabir

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
I THE JOURNEY BEGINS ...	1
II THE KABUL VALLEY ...	7
III THE VALLEY OF BAMIAN ...	16
IV GLANCING WITHIN ...	26
V A TOUCHING SCENE ...	33
VI THROUGH THE WILDERNESS ...	40
VII BALKH—THE MOTHER OF CITIES ...	48
VIII A DULL DAY ...	58
IX WE REACH MAIMANA ...	66
X A LATE NIGHT ...	73
XI THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE ...	80
XII OPERATION WATER ...	89
XIII HERAT ...	96
XIV THE YEARS PAST ...	104
XV THE HELMAND VALLEY ...	113
XVI KANDHAR ...	121
XVII THE PAST TWO HUNDRED YEARS ...	129
XVIII THE JOURNEY ENDS ...	141

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

FROM mid-April to mid-May is the time to travel in Afghanistan. It is spring time. The snow starts to melt. The rivers burst out in myriad songs and the hills and valleys echo the tunes of the singing and gushing waters. Nature as well as the people seem to wake up from a long slumber and there is activity everywhere. The trees, foliage and the people yawn alike and soon they bloom forth in full glory.

The entire population of the country seems to be out of doors. With the melting of snow the high mountainous passes are open. The roads come in shape again. The heavy woollen and cotton padded clothing is discarded. The people feel easy. Holiday-makers are out on picnics. The businessmen scurry around to attend to the work they have neglected during the winter. The officials set out on tours to visit the outlying and rather inaccessible places. Friends and relatives are visiting one another. Numerous domestic ceremonies, pending for some months, must be performed now. These can no longer wait. It is enough. The winter had gone on for too long.

There is another reason which makes me chose this season to travel. The tulips. It is the season of tulips. This beautiful flower grows all over. The hills, valleys, roadsides, and roof-tops sparkle with the tulips. What a feast of beauty and colour ! How many colours and hues are there in nature ? More than that number appear in the wildly abundant tulips.

True, the other seasons in this country have also their charm. The summer is pleasant at higher altitudes. In autumn nature turns yellow and brown with patches of red. The leaves start falling and the flowers begin to lose their colour, though a sweet lethargic beauty still hangs about the rose bushes and the chrysanthemums. Some like this particular season for travel. About October or so. The southern parts of Afghanistan are then not so warm. But I prefer April and May. Nature is still pretty in October—it always is—but people are gathering up their folds. They are thinking of the onset of winter and are getting ready to face it. The opening up of life that has gone on in summer is being gradually brought to a close. The snow will block all routes and passages. The winter is icy cold. The diffused colours of autumn disappear and almost the entire country wears a white robe of snow. The mornings are misty but not for long. For the major portion of the day the sun shines bright and clear. The air is pure and light.

The Afghans love snow for its beauty and for its economic utility. Without adequate snow there will be meagre supply of water for the crops in spring and summer. Snow also bestows health. The invigorating climate braces up the whole nation. There is an age old saying : *Kabul bezar bashad, beharaf na bashad* (May Kabul remain without gold but not without snow.) I too like snow. But I prefer spring.

This spring I have decided to make a trip round Afghanistan. Round is literally meant. This country is in the shape of an irregular quadrilateral with a length of twelve thousand kilometers from north-east to south-east and an average breadth of about six hundred kilometers. Kabul is situated about two hundred and fifty kilometers from the border in the east. A road from Kabul runs round the entire country connecting all the major cities; Pul-i-Khumari, Mazar-i Sharif, Maimana, Herat, Farah, Kandhar, Ghazni and terminating at Kabul. There is only one important town which is not on this ring road.

Jalalabad or modern Nengerhar. It is located in the easterly direction, on the road to Peshawar.

To travel about three thousand kilometers on the ring road is to see most of Afghanistan.

My Willy's jeep station wagon is undergoing repairs. A thorough check up for its serviceability to stand up to the rigours of bad patches is essential. The wagon is only two years old but it loo's worn out. I hope it will not let me down.

I am not fussy about my clothes. Perhaps no soldier is when he is not formally dressed. Then probably he is fastidious. But when out working, fighting or under training, travelling or picnicing, he does not mind. A pair of woollen trousers and a heavy cardigan for the trip through Hindu Kush and two pairs of jeans with a few bush-shirts for the remaining journey are all that I need and take.

But Nirupama's wardrobe is to be chosen with care. This ten years old daughter of mine wants to accompany me. There is something of the born traveller in her, as it was in me. At her age I used to wander all over the Punjab on my own. Never did I stick to a place for more than a few days during the entire three months period of summer vacation. When I was thirteen, my favourite hobby was to go about sight-seeing on bicycle. This thirst for going places never diminished. On the contrary each year has whetted it. Nirupama, pet-named Veena, has also this thirst in her being. She has always been restless. Even in her first year of life she hardly slept more than eight to ten hours a day. They say that normally children at this age should sleep from fifteen to twenty hours a day. At ten she sleeps only seven hours. Can manage with six also. I cannot do with less than eight. She says she dreams of Herat and Kandhar, thus convincing me of her intense desire to accompany me. Rather precocious.

"Dreams in your six hours sleep?" I say.

"What?" she does not understand.

Her mother, Prabhjot, is worried.

"It is a long and difficult journey," Prabhjot says.

"Stop her if you can," I retort.

"How can I if you encourage her?"

"I don't."

"You do."

"I don't. But it is in her blood."

"This is your blood. I don't like it."

"Don't. But what do you want me to do?"

She evades the question. She knows that the minds of the daughter and the father are made up. Surreptitiously she then comes to what is uppermost in her mind.

"You with your carefree habits will not look after her."

"I am more than that. I am careless."

"Don't kid!"

"Do I?"

"Promise you will look after her."

"I promise."

She does not take me seriously. However, she does not intentionally say so. She is busy giving instructions to Veena :

"Your papa is careless. You see that you look after yourself. You even look after him."

She continues :

"Don't drink water from anywhere and everywhere. Don't eat dirty things. Don't you stay alone ever. Take a bath regularly. Tell papa to have his. He shirks them. Through the Hindu Kush dress fully. Don't catch cold. Make papa as well wear a pullover."

Veena is vexed :

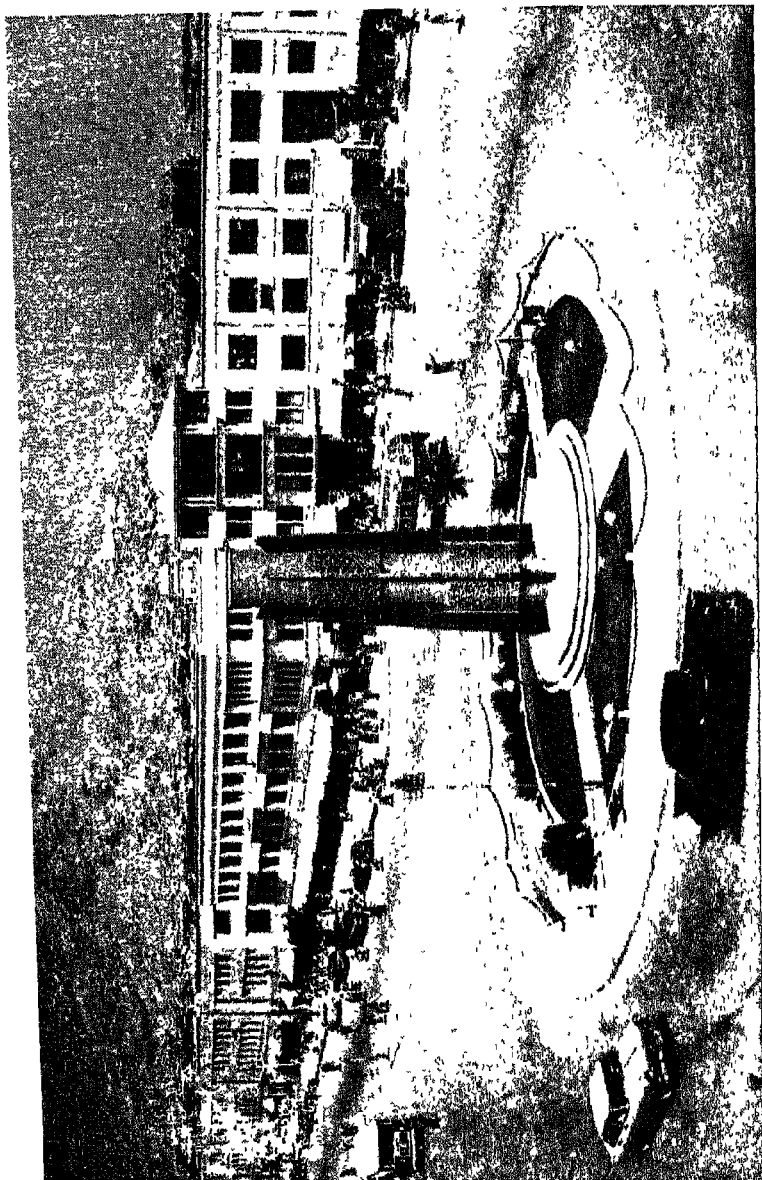
"Why don't you write a book, mum."

Mummy smiles :

"Naughty girl."

"Yes, mummy. Are these the things that you weave in your poetry? Are you famous for such little things?"

Mummy has prepared a full trunk-load of clothes for



Kabul : The Maiwand Memorial

Veena and another trunk-load of tinned food. We need tinned food on the journey but not so much really.

Swamy, the driver, is excited. He likes the prospect of a long journey. But I can see that a fear lurks somewhere in his mind. He is not sure of his station-wagon. The climate here has not suited him. He is always sick in winter. It will do him good to be out, I tell him. This is nice weather. He smiles. Yes, he would like it. He seems to have made up his mind.

"I hope you just won't keep on going without rest. That is what I am afraid of," he seems to ask.

"I shall try. I don't promise though," I try to explain, without words of course.

"Okay," he smiles.

He knows what I mean. His smile is expressive—much more expressive than his Hindi, which is no much like that of an extinct English *sahib*.

I tell him that besides the station wagon he should also prepare himself. He is just as important. Rather more, I flatter him. He smiles and accepts my words. Unknown to him I take a bottle of entero-vioform for him. He is either constipated or has diarrhoea. He also feels low at times. The cause is more psychological than physical.

Pyare Lal, my assistant, also accompanies me. It is always better to have an extra hand on a long journey like this—specially with a two years old station wagon. He is a stalwart Punjabi. His main aim is to buy a carpet somewhere in Mazar-i-Sharif, Andkhui or Herat. He likes carpets but cannot afford to buy them in Kabul. They are a lot expensive here. He is rather serious. Smiles little. An opposite of Swamy.

All is finally set. We leave in the morning at seven on Sunday.

My wife is out to see us off with our younger daughter Anupama, pet-named Rohini.

Prabhjot tells Swamy :

"I hope everything is alright. You have spare gasoline, lubricants and water ? Are all the tools there ? Is the spare wheel properly inflated."

"Yes, *mem sahib*," says Swamy.

"Drive slowly. Roads are tricky, you know. Be careful at the turnings. Blow your horn without reserve. It is safer. Also check up *sahib* when he drives fast."

To Veena she says :

"Remember what I told you. Don't forget. Don't let papa drive fast. Look after yourself and papa too."

She also has a word for Pyare Lal :

"Don't you let the Colonel drive fast. See that he eats and sleeps at proper times. Veena must not be left alone. And give me a telephone ring from wherever you can. Do not depend on the Colonel. You book the calls. It does not cost much."

She does not tell me anything. She does not trust me.

We prepare to leave. Rohini looks wistfully at Veena. I kiss her and say :

"You will have your turn too, my darling."

II

THE KABUL VALLEY

IN the historical sense the Kabul valley is perhaps the most ancient valley in the world. Was this the home of the Aryans? No one can answer for certain but it must have been around here somewhere. Since the Aryans came and prospered in India they cannot but have used Kabul valley as their interim resting place. This has ever been so. Alexander the Great and the Kushans, Tamerlane and Babur have all used this valley for this purpose, as a springboard for the invasion of India.

They say the first king of the Aryans was Yama and he ruled at Bhalika. Bhalika to the Indians was Balkh to the Persians and Bactria to the Greeks. Balkh is only a few hundred kilometers north of Kabul valley beyond the Hindu Kush range.

Alexander decisively defeated the Persians at Gaugamela and the death of Darius Codomanus in 330 B. C. left the field to the east clear before him. The Macedonian Army entered Afghanistan near Herat in 329 B. C. and wended its way into the Kabul valley via Kandhar and Ghazni. The winter overtook Alexander here. He rested and founded the famous city of Alexandria-under-the-Kapisia. Eventually this city was to become the capital of his empire in Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush. In 328 B. C. Alexander crossed the Hindu Kush by the Khawak Pass to subdue the recalcitrant principalities along the Oxus. He encamped at Balkh and laid the city waste. Returning to the Kabul

valley in 327 B. C. he followed the course of the Kabul river to India.

The death of Alexander in 323 B. C. was a signal for the disruption of the empire and for twenty years or more wars between his possible successors continued. Quite a number of the Greek soldiers of the Macedonian Army had stayed back in the North Western India and in the Kabul valley freely intermingling with the local population. Eventually one Euthytemus (220-190 B. C.) founded the first Greco-Bactrian kingdom with its centre at Balkh. By about the beginning of the Christian era the Greco-Bactrian rule declined and Hermacus (45-20 B. C.) became their last king. The Greco-Bactrian rule lasted for nearly two hundred years and Greek art and philosophy therefore exerted a deep influence during this period. Little trace, however, remains today of the Greek colonisation except in the coins which have recently been discovered at various places in Afghanistan. During this period also developed the form of self-governing walled villages which is a feature of even present day Afghanistan, though fast disappearing. Side by side with the decline of the Greco-Bactrian rule, the Mauryas, under the military and administrative genius of the founder Chandra Gupta, were advancing from India. Soon the Mauryan empire was to extend upto the very Hindukush. During the time of Ashoka, who ruled from 273 B. C. to 232 B. C., a large number of people in the Central Asian region accepted Buddhism and Hadda, Bagram -sprung up on the site of Alexandria-under-the-Kapisia -and Bamian came to be established as the seats of art and learning. Very fine specimens of the Greco-Buddhist art of this and the Kushan period have come down to us in spite of the ravages of time and make the modern museum at Kabul extremely interesting and rich.

By about the middle of the first century rose the Kushans whose great empire later extended from Benaras in India to the verge of the Gobi desert. The greatest of the

Kushan kings was Kanishka (120-160) who perhaps ruled over one of the largest empires in the history of the world. During his reign Buddhism, seeds of which had been sown by Ashoka, became the predominant religion in the entire Central Asia. This also marked the zenith of civilisation, culture and learning in this region. The songs of traders, travellers and pilgrims reverberated in the remotest nooks and corners of the mighty and rugged Hindu Kush. A brisk pace of commercial and religious activity characterised the rule of the Kushans from one end of the empire to the other.

Balkh, Bamian, Bagram, Hadda—eight miles from Nengerhar—and Kandhar were big and prosperous cities besides having innumerable monasteries. Dealing with this period the French historian Monsieur Grousset observes, "Afghanistan was the principal propagator of Buddhist art and literature throughout the Chinese Turkistan and even into China itself. When the Chinese records show us the Yue-Chi missionaries crossing the wastes of the Gobi to find communities at Lo-Yang, or coming over the sea as far as Annam, we know that these were monks coming from Balkh, from Bagram or from Jalalabad (Nengerhar). The Afghan valleys have thus been the centre for the dispersion of ideas and aesthetics. The influence of the frescoes of Bamian and Kakrak is felt right into the heart of Chinese Turkistan and even as far as Japan."

The Kabul valley is a hundred and thirty kilometers long and twenty to thirty kilometers broad. It stretches for over a hundred kilometers in the north of Kabul. Alexandria-under-the-Kapisia or Bagram is seventy kilometers from Kabul. As I ramble some of these facts of history to my daughter, she asks me :

"Where is Bagram now ?"

"Around there," I point out the place to her as we race along.

"Let us go and see it !"

"There is nothing there now."

"How do you know?"

"I know. People have told me so."

"Which people?"

"The people who have seen it."

"But what good is this journey if you have to take other people's word for it."

I turn my wagon. Most of the area which once had been a prosperous city is now converted into an airfield.

We reach the ancient site of Bagram. Only a few mounds remain. Nothing at all of interest.

"But Hadda was better," Vcena is disappointed.

"Just a little!"

Last year about this time we had been to Hadda. Extensive excavations had been carried out there and empty pits gaped at the visitors. In the days of the Buddhist ascendancy Hadda was the home of the famous monk, Buddhahadra. Chinese travellers Fa-Hsin, 'To-Yaung and Yuan-Chwang visited him there. A number of stupas still stand but they are denuded of all embellishments.

"Are all the historical places so bare and barren?"

"Perhaps," I tell my daughter.

"To me they seem horrid."

"But you will find Bamian different."

"I hope so."

We leave Istalif in the west and Gulbahar in the east. Both these places are attractive picnic spots and we have been there often.

It has taken us about three hours to reach Matak at the foot of the Hindu Kush. For the next three hundred and fifty kilometers we have to play hide and seek in this mighty range. The Hindu Kush is the chief distinctive physical feature of Afghanistan. It is a western off-shoot of the Himalayas. Extending from Sarikol it runs in a south-westerly direction and ultimately merges, by gentle gradients, into the Turkoman desert. The Hindu Kush forms a great watershed which separates two-thirds of Afghanistan in the

south from one-third in the north. In the south it drains the basins of the Indus and the Helmund, while in the north, of the river Oxus. The Hindu Kush is a bewildering mountain. It throws off huge spurs in all directions which cover a major portion of the northern, western and central Afghanistan. The ranges of the Hindu Kush are crossed by fast moving and gushing streams, flowing alternately north and south, their beds forming the caravan routes over which commerce and social intercourse was carried out in the past. The main passes are Nil, Ak Robot, Shibar, Qipchak, Salang and Khawak.

Generally these passes are open for six months in a year. On the southern side the slopes are steep while on the northern side they are long and gradual. The route used by the ancient caravans appears to be long and circuitous. In all probability they followed the Balkh river and crossed the Hindu Kush at Nil or Ak Robot Passes to enter into the valley of Bamian. This seems reasonable as Bamian was then the most important city between Balkh and India. Here the weary traveller could rest and relax, and when Buddhism became the predominant religion, he could also listen to the sermons of the wise monks. From Bamian one could enter the Kabul valley either via the Shibar Pass or via the Haji Gak Pass. Huan Tsang, in the seventh century used the former while Ibn Batuta in the fourteenth century the latter. Alexander the Great, it appears, used both the Khawak and the Salang Passes. Timur in 1398 came through the Khawak Pass and Babur in 1504 by the Qipchak Pass which is 1070 meters high. In 1930, during the reign of King Nadir Shah, the first road capable of taking vehicular traffic was constructed through the Shibar Pass, 756 meters high. This road is not a good one and during the winter months it is impossible to negotiate. Even during the normal times only vehicles with a four-wheeled-drive can climb up the narrow and steep ascent from the south. A new all-weather road is being constructed with Soviet aid through the Salang Pass and

has come to be known as the Salang highway. When completed it will have a total of fifteen kilometers of tunnels, the longest tunnel being over a kilometer and a half long.

We get off the wagon near here. Pyare Lal and Swamy walk away to stretch their legs.

"We will be back in a few minutes," says Pyare Lal.

I know Swamy wants to have a cigarette. He has winked to Pyare Lal to get my permission. I have often told Swamy not to bother about it. I am used to people smoking around me. But he is deeply respectful. He does not agree. If he happens to see me when he is smoking he immediately puts off his cigarette and throws it away.

"Why waste a good cigarette," I say.

He smiles but does not answer.

I sit down on a big boulder and gaze at the Hindu Kush rising like a great wall upto the sky. I also gaze at the three thousand years of past history. I wonder if it is any use travelling without having a sense of history. It is only the knowledge and a proper perspective of history which can give meaning to the present and the future.

We start the gradual ascent.

Pyare Lal reminds me:

"Mrs. Singh had asked you to wear the pullover when entering the Hindu Kush."

"Oh, yes !" I remember.

I do not feel the necessity, however. But Veena must wear it. I have promised to look after her. I ask her to do so. She will only wear one if all of us do the same.

"We are grown up. Tough."

"So am I. Tougher than all of you. What do you think?"

Our maximum speed has now been reduced to about thirty kilometers per hour. The road is getting worse. In the next three hours we only reach Char Deh, less than a hundred kilometers from Charikar.

The hills here open up a bit. There is about two

kilometers of opening on either side of the road. In spite of the fact that Veena has been munching at something or the other she feels hungry. So do I. We park our wagon and set our lunch. We have, with us, our lunch as well as dinner. Prabhjot had seen to it that, at least, for the first day of the journey we get good and wholesome food. There is roast chicken, mutton chops, salad, Indian bread and rice pudding. We have a big flask full of tea also. We have our lunch and wear our pullovers. I force Veena to use the coat and the muffler also. She resists. When we all persuade her she reluctantly agrees. I am tougher than the whole lot of you, she still insists.

The actual Shibar Pass consists of six kilometers of steep climb. It is wise to stop a while before you attempt the pass. We find about twenty trucks parked in a small open space. The engines of the vehicles are being given time to cool down. It is chilly and yet the bonnets are open. There is a small *Cha-i-Khana*, the tea-house. I never miss an opportunity to go into an Afghan tea-house. The atmosphere here is the friendliest. The samovar may be old and dirty. The crockery may be poor. The benches and other seating arrangements are decidedly uncomfortable. But there is an aroma of contentment, joy, goodwill and friendship. The greatest thing is that no modern-day complexes mar your conversation with those present in the tea-house. Complexes of superiority and inferiority, complexes of being a native or a foreigner, complexes of being rich or poor. The Afghans do make a god out of you for being a foreigner. They do give you precedence. They would even refuse to accept anything for tea and cats. But then they do not make a fetish of it. The whole affair is so natural, easy-going. There is this poetic quality about the Afghan hospitality.

We enter the tea-house and all of us start talking with the Afghans present. There has been extremely heavy snow this year. It was welcome. But there have been equally heavy rains. This is rather unfortunate. The conversation veers

round this topic. Even Veena joins in. All such topics end up in 'God's will. No one can question what He ordains. This is the same in India. Same is true in most of the countries in the East. I personally do not like this attitude towards God. I do not like the negation of self and one's efforts as ultimately the will of God is to prevail; but I cannot help liking the people who believe so out of the extreme simplicity and nobility of their hearts.

Swamy hurries up with his tea. Goes out and takes a look at the wagon. I ask him if all is set. He smiles. Does he mean yes? Yes and no at the same time.

We start the climb. It has rained a day before. The road is in a bad condition. The ascent is therefore slow and tricky. But I have experience of such roads. I manage. Barely.

The top of Shibar Pass. A pleasant surprise. The snow has not yet melted here. It is lying all about. It sparkles under the slanting rays of the sun. Numerous peaks of the Hindu Kush range are also clad in snow. Few of them are eternally so. We look down at the road we have come up. It seems a wonder that we did make it.

I park the car. Veena runs away.

"I want to play with snow, papa?"

"Go ahead. I'll join you."

But then I suddenly think of Prabhjot. She would not approve of it. Can I help it though?

"I love snow," she says.

"So do I!"

"Why don't we have snow in India?"

"We have. But we live in the plains."

"I will not go back to India unless you promise to take me to the mountains where it snows."

"Will you stay back alone?"

"Yes," she says in jest.

"Okay. I will leave you then."

She knows I do not mean it.

We make snowballs and throw them at each other.

"May I make a snowman, papa?"

"No, no. There is no time."

"Please let me. It is such fun. You remember the one Rohini and myself made at Kabul. Complete with hat, stick, suit and shoes."

"Yes, but I only made it realistic by making it hold a bottle of Johnny Walker in the hand."

"No, you spoiled it."

"Anyway, let us get going now."

"Please papa, stay a little while."

But in the meantime Swamy comes:

"*Mam sahib* said that you should not..."

"Okay, Okay." I cut him short.

After the Shibar Pass one enters what is known as Shumbol canyon. During my extensive journeys in India and abroad I have passed through many a canyon but this one is certainly different. The narrow road goes along a narrow gorge with gushing water. The gorge itself is fairly low from the elevation of the road and has steep banks but steeper still are the cliffs which rise some three hundred meters perpendicularly on both sides of the road. In this canyon strange emotions rise within one's heart. How can one adequately describe them in words? One wonders as to how these cliffs stand upright without falling down. The sun perhaps never shines in this part of Afghanistan.

After travelling another thirty-five kilometers or so one has to turn left on a rickety bridge. The turning is so inconspicuous that unless one knows about it in advance one is likely to miss it. There is a two-meters high pillar at the turning but that is no indication for turning left or going straight on. There is no arrowmark pointing to the vale of Bamian. The bridge is old and one is doubtful if it shall not give way under one's car. But it does not.

About fifteen kilometers on this road one finds Share-i-Zohak, the Red City and another fifteen kilometers beyond Share-i-Zobak, Bamian.

III

THE VALLEY OF BAMIAN

BAMIAN is the finest historical remains in Afghanistan and the valley of Bamian the most beautiful valley. Coming to Afghanistan and not visiting Bamian is something like going to Agra and failing to see the Taj.

Bamian is about half way between Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif or between the ancient Balkh (Bactria) and Peshawar. The road from Balkh to Peshawar, observes Mr. A. Foucher, was in a way a link between the Scythian and the Indian parts of the vast empire of Kushana Kanishka.

It was perhaps this very road that the famous Chinese traveller Huan-Tsang took in 632. About Bamian he records that it was a regal city with several monasteries and thousands of monks. Huan-Tsang records having seen here a reclining statue of Buddha, three hundred meters long, and two standing Buddhas. One finds no trace of the reclining Buddha now. Sure enough it must have been destroyed sometime during the past thirteen centuries.

A Korean monk named Houci Tachao also travelled through this valley in 728. He found the city of Bamian a great one and records that the king of this place was powerful and owed no allegiance to anyone. He also records that the horsemen and foot soldiers of this kingdom were strong and smart.

In 1222 the great Chengiz arrived in this valley with his thirst for blood still unquenched and his heart still bent upon conquering and destroying all the famous and rich

cities of the world. The following is a brief extract from his biography by Harold Lamb regarding the battle at Bamian.

"Chenghis Khan took the field with 60,000 men to find and destroy the new Kharesmian army. He found in his path the strong city of Bamiyan in the Koh-i-Baba ranges. He settled down to invest it, sending the greater part of his forces under another Orkhan to meet Jalal-ed-Din.... The khan ordered an assault—the storm that is not to be abandoned until the city is taken. At this point one of his grandsons, who had followed him under the walls, was killed. The old Mongol ordered the body of the child, that he liked for his courage—to be carried back to the tents.

"He urged on the assault, and, throwing off his helmet, pushed through his ranks until he was at the head of a storming party. They gained footing in a breach, and Bamiyan fell to them not long after. Every living being was slain within its walls, and mosques and palaces pulled down. Even the Mongols spoke of Bamiyan as Mou-baligh, the city of sorrow."

It is against the background of such destructions and holocausts that we have got to view the remaining traces of Buddhist art and architecture in this valley.

I keep on giving such bits of information to Veena. She listens. Asks pertinent questions. As we are nearing the actual village of Bamian she suddenly asks me:

"How do you know all these things?"

"What things?"

"Which you keep on telling me. These titbits from history."

"My dear baby, what do you think I am? Don't I read books?"

"I do too."

"But not the big ones I read."

"Can you keep all in your head?"

"No, not all. But I have made a special study before

undertaking this trip."

"You are a crook, papa?"

"Eh?"

"Yes. Why didn't you tell me too!"

We are in the village of Bamian. About a thousand souls live here. None of them perhaps knows the details of the hoary greatness of the land he treads under his feet. They do not seem to be conscious of the treasure which once existed here. They do not know that the air they breathe is saturated with rich past. They are not aware that every tree, stone, boulder and atom of this valley hoards stories of rare interest.

We ask them the route to the Buddhas. They point in a direction. I ask them about the hotel. They point in a different direction. Vecna knows what I mean. I am deciding if we should not put off our visit to the Buddhas till tomorrow. It is evening already and it is getting cold.

"Let us go and finish with it," she says.

"Finish with what?"

"See these Buddhas, what else?"

"But we don't want to finish off with it. We want to take it easy. Will do it tomorrow."

"I knew that."

Swamy drives on towards the hotel. There is a steep climb of about three hundred meters. Why did they have to make the hotel so high, mutters Swamy. It will be such a nice view, I tell him. He smiles. He does not care for the views and the scenery.

The hotel-keeper has been informed of our arrival. All the hotels in Afghanistan are controlled by the State. It was king Amanullah's idea. In the otherwise underdeveloped country these were the only places where the officials from Kabul and other provincial headquarters could stay overnight. Most of these hotels are comfortable. Some are not so good. Some are mediocre. The one at Bamian falls in the last category. But the site has been well chosen. From the

premises of the hotel one can view the giant Buddhas standing on one side with innumerable grottoes carved in the rocks. On the other side are clearly visible the ruins of Gholgholah. The Bamian river flows about eighty meters below and towards the west one can see bits of the winding road to Band-i-Mir.

The room meant for Veena and myself is freezing cold. Its *bokhari*, stove, is out of order. Otherwise it is richly furnished. We, however, need *bokhari*. We can do without furniture. But there is no other decent room, the keeper tells me. We have to be content.

After supper I put Veena to bed. Go to sleep, I tell her. Not so soon, she says. She wants to read a bit. She cannot go to sleep without reading a little. I know. I had a similar weakness at her age. Still have. The malady is hereditary. I leave her reading "Heide" and go to see Pyare Lal and Swamy.

They are comfortable. Their room is warm. Pyare Lal asks me for the next day's programme and Swamy invites me to a cup of tea. The *bokhari* is being used to boil water for tea.

I come back and take up Hemingway's "Old Man And The Sea." But I cannot go far. Veena keeps on interrupting me. She wants to know the meanings of many a word which she cannot understand. It goes on for some time, somehow. Then I start feeling cold. Three blankets are certainly not enough in this room. Veena must be cold too, I think. I ask her. She is. We cannot get any more blankets. The only answer is that Veena and I sleep together.

"You come over in this bed Veena."

"No papa, you come here. My bed is warmer."

"No Veena, this bed is wider and comfortable."

"But papa, I cannot get up now. It is so cold."

I get up and join her. We have six blankets now. These are just enough.

"Go to sleep girl."

"What about you?"

"Look Veena, I am not ten years old. It is too early for me."

"So it is for me papa. Won't you read to me 'Heide'? Please do."

"Why can't you read it yourself?"

"It is too difficult. I can't understand."

"I told you to bring simpler books."

"Read to me papa. Don't be selfish."

"What will you give me?"

Veena is perplexed. She thinks for a bit and says:

"A kiss."

I smile.

"What ! One kiss for the whole book?"

"Okay. Two."

"No. One per chapter."

"Accepted."

I read "Heide" to her. It is a moving story of a grandfather and his little girl Heide. The old man quarrels with the village folk and starts living apart in the mountains. Heide stays with him and as such gets no schooling. The aunt living in Frankfurt considers it improper. She comes and takes away Heide. The old man is grieved. Heide also misses the grand dad and the fresh mountain air. She falls sick. The doctors advise a change to the hills. The aunt brings Heide back and manages to reconcile the old man with the village folk.

I read the story to Veena. I kiss her after each chapter. When it is over she says:

"Isn't it nice?"

"Well ! so so."

"Horrid pop. You are not poetic at all. Mummy would have liked it."

"I am a soldier."

"Can't soldiers be poets and anyway you also pretend to be a writer."

"Go to sleep. You talk too much I tell you."

She is asleep and I watch her. An innocent face. Innocent emotions. Something sacred hovers around her. Will she leave me like Heide ? No, not like Heide. Ten years more and she will have her own life. Her own interests. Then she will be married. Will these ten years pass as quickly as the past ten ? I seem to imagine that she was born only the other day. Tears fill my eyes. I pick up, "Old Man And The Sea."

I am up early next morning. Even with six blankets it has been cold. I did not have sound sleep. Veena still sleeps peacefully.

After breakfast we go to see the Bamian valley. The most important relics here, of course, are the standing Buddhas.

There are two of them, nearly four hundred meters apart. One of them is forty-seven meters high and the other fifty-five meters. Both the statues have been carved from rocks and are protected by a niche each. The smaller Buddha is the older of the two and was probably carved in the reign of the great Kanishka himself. The larger one is younger by about hundred and fifty years but still constructed during the reign of Kanishka dynasty. The bigger statue is more refined in style and shows unmistakable signs of Greco-Buddhist sculpture.

Both these colossal statues had steps leading to the top but while these steps in the case of smaller Buddha are fairly intact those of the larger Buddha have been destroyed or have crumbled. In spite of this, however, one can reach the top of greater Buddha by a circuitous hill path from its rear.

Standing below these two great figures one feels himself to be too small. It is something the like of which does not exist anywhere in the world. One cannot but marvel at the skill and perfection of those who carved these giant figures. The ravages of the plundering nomadic kings rather than the ravages of time have removed much that was exquisite, beautiful and ornamental. The finer details of the figure and of the clothes cannot now be seen. The deliberate attempts made to destroy these statues are obvious at first glance but

there is something in this granite which is indestructible. It is also obvious that when in spite of all their efforts the Saffuids, the Ghaznavids and the Mongols could not erase these figures, one of them at least thought it becoming to chop off the face of this unholy god. The tremendous effort that was put in to achieve this is also obvious as only half of the faces of either Buddha have been chopped. The remaining portions are still defying the intentions of the destroyers. There are also the visible marks of gunfire on one of the statues, again presumably in an attempt to destroy it. The shells too have had little effect on these statues.

There are four groups of grottoes or monasteries on each side of the niches of these Buddhas. In these grottoes were perfected various frescos, models and decorations. Very little trace of them now remains. Some of the frescos and the specimens of sculpture are found in the Kabul museum but alas ! these are very few indeed. Few specimens are available even in photographs. At present one is afraid of entering these grottoes in spite of the powerful torchlights. How the artists and the painters some two thousand years ago worked in these hollows one cannot say.

Besides these grottoes around the feet of the Buddha there must have been a million other grottoes and monasteries in the valley of Bamian and each of them possibly contained precious murals and rare pieces of art. Traces of some thousands of these grottoes are still visible. But all these grottoes are now empty and as if avidly gaze at the visitors all the time subduedly sighing at their pristine glory and present decadence. In many of these caves now rests the local populace. The shelter provided by them from the bitter cold and freezing wind is better than that can be found in some of the huts in the surrounding countryside.

The ceiling of the niche of the forty-seven meters high Buddha has an interesting scene of the Lunar god painted on it. This god is surmounted by a yellow nimbus. The god is wearing a long robe and has a spear in the right hand. A

long sword supports his left hand. The god is seen standing in a chariot drawn by four winged horses. The chariot driver too is winged. Another two winged genii, one bearing a spear and the other a shield, follow the god. The painting is Indian in thought and execution, the vehicle and the winged horses are Greek in tradition and the weapons show an influence from Central Asia and Iran.

The murals on the ceiling and around the greater Buddha are varied and numerous or it appears that they were so at one time. Uptil now one can see in the niche Bodhisatvas, two nude female figures playing a guitar, and another beautiful female with a slim waist and groups of angels carrying offerings to Lord Buddha. There are many murals and carvings showing the Buddha meditating under the Bodhi tree.

And that is all about these best remnants of the great Buddhist culture which flourished here for nearly one thousand years. All great works of ancient art and culture, when seen amidst the twentieth century hustle and bustle, fill a reflective visitor with regrets and possibly sorrow; the ruins in Bamian are no exception.

The present Government of Afghanistan has done a lot towards the maintenance of these relics. Unlike some of the past dynasties the present attitude is enlightened. The remains at Bamian, Bagram and Hadda are accepted as something of which Afghanistan can be proud. Attempts have been recently made to rewrite the past history, accept and laud the ancient culture, preserve monuments and view everything from a secular and modern perspective. These efforts may not make up for the destruction, plunder and neglect of the last twelve centuries but these may prevent further harm being done. It is fairly obvious that unless any further deliberate destruction takes place these figures will sustain their present shape and what one may say their present glow and freshness for thousands of years to come.

But the story of the vale of Bamian will not be

complete without mentioning a few more places of interest.

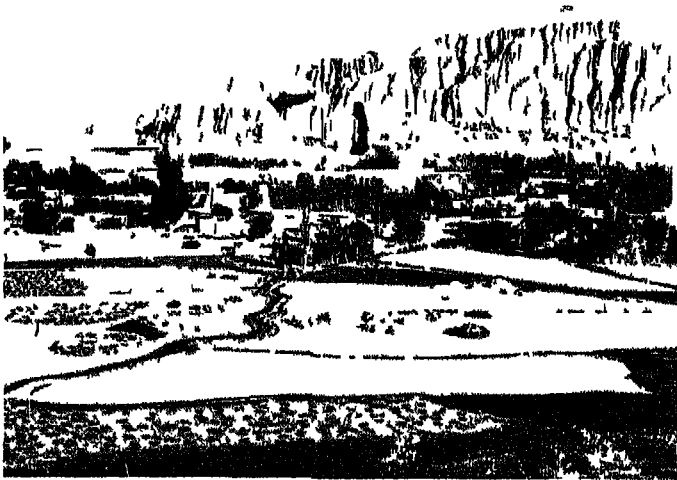
About three kilometers from the two figures of Buddha, stand on the top of a rocky knoll the ruins of Shar-i-Gholgholah. This city was once the capital of the Islamic dynasty of Shansabanids, which was a branch of the great Ghorids. This city was also presumably destroyed by Chengiz Khan.

A mule track from Bamian leads to a rocky ridge about two hundred meters long which is whitened by the incrustations of a spa. This is reported to be the remains of the Ajdhaha killed by Hazart Ali and as such is a pilgrim's place of the Hazaras. This is approximately seven kilometers due west of Bamian.

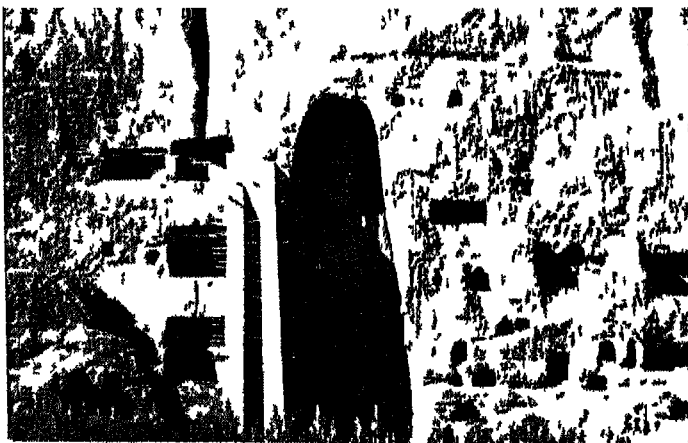
In Kakrak which is four and a half kilometers south-east of Bamian there are grottoes, monasteries and a fifteen meters high statue of Buddha. The most important group of Buddhist frescos which now adorns the Kabul museum comes from Kakrak. A big figure representing the Bodhisatva Maitreys used to occupy the centre of the dome of the niche. Seven big circles with a Buddha in the centre and surrounded by eleven others used to encircle the dome.

Out of the Kakrak frescoes at present in the Kabul museum, a fresco of a hunting king sitting on a throne with his bow in his hands is much appreciated by the connoisseurs of art. The king is supposed to be in conversation with Buddha promising him not to kill and hunt any more, perhaps in the tradition of Emperor Ashoka. His hunting dog, two arrows, and the heads of two ducks can also be seen in the picture. The fresco probably belongs to the period between the fourth and the sixth century when Shir dynasty, the descendant of Kanishkas, was ruling the valley.

From Bamian we proceed to Band-i-Mir. This is a big lake situated sixty-five kilometers west. If Swamy had his way he would not go to Band-i-Mir. He gets tired. But when



A view of Bamian



Bamian : the small Buddha

I tell him to stay back, he does not agree either. He is aware that I am clumsy when it comes to repairing a vehicle. He does not want me to get stranded.

The view at Band-i-Mir is in keeping with the grandeur of the valley of Bam'an. The waters of this lake spring from Kapruk, fifteen kilometers away.

We do not return from Band-i-Mir till three in the afternoon. Swamy and Pyare laL are hungry. Swamy has a crack at me:

"We return early Colonel sahib. I thought we will spend the night at Band-i-Mir."

Pyare lal and I smile and Pyare lal explains:

"He is feeling hungry."

"But stop him from eating too much. He will be sick."

"As usual."

We return to the hotel.

It is a late lunch indeed. But the cook has made a good job of it, Afghan rice and curry. By the way, Bamian valley produces the best *ghee*, margarine, in the country. Food finished, I settle down with "Spartacus" by Howard Fast.

The *bokhari* is being repaired and the smith from the village says he is hopeful.

"You are not going back till you repair it," I tell him.

IV

GLANCING WITHIN

WE leave Bamian early; at half past six. I plan to cover a lot today though I do not tell this to Swamy and Pyare Lal. I am sure they will get disheartened. Swamy had a stomach-ache this morning. So Pyare Lal told me. I know what is he heading for. I immediately search in my medical pannier and give him two tablets of entero-vioform.

"How are you Pyare Lal?"

"I am alright sir. You see Swamy ate a little too much of lunch."

"Didn't I tell you?"

"You did but Swamy would not stop. He says he doesn't know what is going to happen to him on this journey. He might as well eat his fill."

"He says that, eh?"

"And yet he didn't want to stay back at Kabul, you remember."

"I do."

I have, however, told Veena that it is going to be a long day. She does not mind it. On the contrary she looks forward to it. If she had her way she would eliminate nights altogether.

The going is good and we reach the bridge over the Bamian river in about half an hour. I stop abruptly. The bridge seems more frail than it was yesterday. I am surprised how did we cross it then. All of us get down and examine the fragile structure. Just then a three-tonner loaded with at least five tons of logs goes over it without any hesitation.

We all look at one another. Pyarc Lal mutters an oath and we go across.

The Shumbol canyon continues for another fifteen kilometers. Every hundred to two hundred meters there is a turn. I blow the horn at each turn. But when I negotiate it there is nothing coming from the opposite direction. Twice I do not take this precaution and both the times I miss a near accident. The accident saved, the driver of the opposing vehicle stops, smiles and says, "God be praised." God's will is done, I reply and drive on.

We now reach Doab. We need gasoline. But what do we find? A row of about sixty trucks waiting at the gasoline station. The gasoline had finished. These people have been waiting here for two days.

"But you should go on. You need only little."

"No, I will await my turn. The gasoline is there now."

"No, you must not wait. You will be here till the evening."

"No, no, I await my turn."

"What a wonderful foreigner", they say.

They go and bring the constable. He persuades me not to waste my time. When an Afghan persuades in his rugged rambling Persian, one cannot but agree.

Doab to Doshi is seventy kilometers. Near about Doshi the new Salang highway will terminate. Doshi to Pul-i-Khumri is forty-eight kilometers. The valley has opened up and the road is also a bit better.

A new hotel has just been built here. It is modern and comfortable. The lounge and the dining room are spacious. New carpets have been spread. One of them about thirty meters long is really pretty. It is of Maur pattern. I am fond of carpets. Afghanistan has made me so. I have a good collection at home, within means though. Maur is the finest quality they produce here. These can be considered as one of the best in the world. Another quality is known as Daultabadi. It is similar to Maur in pattern but is inferior

in weave and texture. In Mazar-i-Sharif they produce another pattern popularly known as elephant foot Herati carpets have a peculiar merit of their own. A sprinkling of yellow differentiates them from red, black and white of Maur and Mazari carpets.

A hotel in Afghanistan is more than a hotel. It is, in addition, an official club, an official meeting place and a circuit house. We are feeling at home.

I ask Pyare Lal and Swamy to hurry up with their lunch.

"Are we going on ?" asks Swamy.

"No, but we are going sightseeing."

His face shows signs of exhaustion.

I add:

"But you need not come. In fact you must rest. You are not well."

"I am sick alright but I will not stay back."

"But you must."

"I must not," he says emphatically.

Pul-i-Khumri is one of the most modern towns in Afghanistan. It has wide and shady roads and the buildings are up to date. The area around is industrially rich. A cloth factory has been in existence since mid-thirties. A power house on river Surkhob, which flows through the town, was completed in early forties. A silo factory was put up last year. A cement factory is due to come up soon. Huge petroleum storage tanks are under construction. About twenty kilometers away are the Karkar coal mines.

Coal mines are the ones which I feel excited about. I have not yet seen any coal mine and what I have not yet seen excites me.

The journey to the site is picturesque. Typically like the Ootacamund Downs, I was reminded of a serious fall in the Ooty Downs. At the Staff College, Wellington I had taken some lessons in horse-riding. I thought I had become a rider. I joined the hunt. Going down a hill I fell off and rolled

for nearly fifteen meters. Luckily I escaped with bruises only.

In the office of the Karkar coal mines they give us special clothings to wear. Special shoes and hats. They object to Veena accompanying us. But will she stop ? The tunnels have been dug in many layers. Hurricane lanterns hang every few meters. A little trolly train is our real guide. The people are at work. Is it work or sacrifice ? They work to give their brethren warmth and light. The mines grip me strangely. Only last night I was reading "Spartacus" which gives graphic description of the methods employed to make the slaves work in different types of mines. The Roman slave-drivers were cruel. Thousands of the slaves perished in and around the mines. Humanity has come far since the days of slavery and gladiators. But has it really ?

Inside the tunnels Swamy is afraid. "Oh God, Oh God", he goes on muttering, "Heavens forbid if the hill should give in." Terror rides his face. I tell him to fall back but he does not. I am sure his diarrhoea is going to get worse.

From Karkar we return to Pul-i-Khumri and then go about twelve kilometers north-west. The aim is to see Surkh Kotal, at the foot of the passes leading to the mountains of Pamir. The events which brought about the discovery of these ruins are interesting. In 1951 the Ministry of Communications of the Royal Afghan Government decided to change the alignment of the existing road running between Pul-i Khumri and Mazar-i-Sharif. The new road crossed a small pass called, "Surkh Kotal", the Red Pass. It was in the course of digging here that the workmen discovered a brick bastion built on a foundation of stones, some of which bore certain inscriptions. The fact was duly reported and eventually a team of archaeologists arrived here. Monsieur D. Schlumberger, a Frenchman, was the leader as he had been before during many other excavations. He found that the whole periphery of the hillock was surrounded by a moat which could easily be recognised as part of a system of fortifications.

When the work started they found here the remains of a vast rectangular court with a mound in the middle. The central area is now almost entirely unearthed and the huge mound contains a large temple, in the centre of which there is a fire sanctuary still filled with fine grey ashes. "The Greeks Strabo and Pausanias have left descriptions of the sacrifices they witnessed in Anatolia where, at the other end of the Iranian domain, they visited temples having in their centre an altar heaped with ashes and over which the priests maintained an inextinguishable flame." The temple at Surkh Kotal is without doubt one such temple.

It is difficult to assess the period to which this temple and other connected remains belong. It seems credible that they were built some centuries after Zoroaster but certainly they date prior to the time when Zoroastrianism began to be practised in its modern form in the beginning of the Sassanid period in the second century. Monsieur Schlumberger and other archaeologists place these buildings as having been constructed in the Kushan period. To me this does not appear correct. One cannot accept that once the Kushan rulers had adopted Buddhism as the state religion there could have been a construction of such magnitude, propagating a completely different form of worship and at that so near Bamian. The Kushan rule was powerful and extremely well knit. It permeated down to the remotest parts of the country. Thus I feel that this fire temple was built when the years were drawing close to the Christian era and that further examination of the language used on the coins and other tablets found there will confirm my theory. It may be pointed out that so far this language has not been fully deciphered.

Mr. Hilmi, a Lebanon born Frenchman has taken me round the excavations. There is Mrs. Hilmi also, one of the prettiest young things I have ever seen. Fresh and dainty as a flower. Even the air would pollute her, it seems. But she works here amidst the dust and the dust-storms. The weather has already warmed up. When I see her, she

is still red all over, though the sun is about to set in the west. She wears a pair of tight-fitting slacks and a blouse. The straw hat is big, casting a shadow over her entire face. I know the couple well. They spend about six months in Kabul every year. I have brought for them some beer and their letters and newspapers.

Sightseeing over, they invite me to their tent-house. Nearing the tent I hear a baby crying. I had forgotten that they had a baby four months old. I wish I had brought something for him. Inside the tent we sit down on the camel seats and they ask me the news of Kabul. I make further enquiries about their work. Over a glass of beer we sit and chat for a long time. They are happy that I have come. For three to four months they are here. They hardly have a visitor, specially a French-speaking one. The sun has set and a chilly wind starts blowing. Veena, who has been busy with the child, feels cold and I see that she wants to go. It is feed time for the baby as well.

"You were once so small," I tell Veena.

"No, never."

We never like to believe that once we were helpless babies.

"We are glad you came," says Mr. Hilmi.

"Really, it was wonderful," adds Mrs. Hilmi.

"Come back to Kabul soon."

"Yes, we will. My baby is most uncomfortable," reprovingly she looks at her husband.

"I have a date with you for the first evening in the International Club."

"You are naughty Colonel. Having best from everyone."

On the way back I think of the couple. Excavators and archaeologists are artists in their own way. What is it that brings them here? Away from the pale of civilisation. Far away from glittering Paris. They are not used to such living. Yet they take it. There is an inward urge. There is a restlessness in the soul. I realise it. There is a similar

restlessness in me. There are impulses and urges we cannot distinguish, analyse, but they shape our lives, our destinies. It is not the coarse ambition of amassing wealth or a finer desire for fame. It is not even the lure for power. It is something else, something different. Is it the fulfilment of self-expression? Self-expression to satisfy a yearning, to grasp what always escapes. It falls only to the few; this restlessness of the being, a restlessness of the soul.

V

A TOUCHING SCENE

"WHAT time do we leave tomorrow morning." Pyarelal asked me before retiring to bed last night.

"At seven as usual."

"Seven, sir ?"

"Yes. Why, what is the matter ?"

"Swamy requests if it could be a little later."

"Okay at nine then. But you warn him that such concessions will not be given everyday."

In fact I also wanted to sleep till late in the morning, I do not like getting up early, unless I have to. It is a habit from childhood. I would study till late in the night but never in the mornings. Late to bed and late to rise has ever been my principle. Contrary to popular belief nothing stuck in my mind at dawn. Nothing in fact entered there. I was yawning and falling asleep all the time.

But if I have to, I do get up. As a soldier one has to. Or when I am travelling. Specially in India. It is too hot during the day. Or abroad when the journey is long.

Today's journey is a rather short one. From Pul-i-Khumri to Kunduz is only seventy-three kilometers and the road is tolerable. We drive along the river Surkhab. There are no tortuous turnings and the traffic is steady. Between Matak and Pul-i-Khumri we come across at least a dozen stranded trucks, all of them with broken springs or axles. The vehicles wear out quickly on these roads. We keep our fingers crossed.

Our wagon is also old. There is a feeling of reassurance on this road.

There is only one sizeable town on this route, Bhaglan. It is the capital of the province of Kataghan. We do not stop here. There is nothing to see.

On to Kunduz. A couple of kilometers short of the town we have to ferry our wagon across a river. Veena is so excited to see this spectacle. As the boat is leaving with our wagon and the donkeys and their escorts, Pyare Lal is found missing. Swamy shouts for him and asks the boatman to stop a while. Pyare Lal comes running. He has been busy with a fruit-seller haggling for price. He just makes the boat. Swamy bursts out laughing. Veena asks me to tell her a joke about a Swede who was going to miss a boat in a similar manner. She had forgotten it. I relate it to all of them. Two Swedes were to go across the river in a boat. Targe got in while Ole was haggling over a purchase. When Ole drew near the bank the boat was already a couple of meters in the water. "Jump Ole, jump," cried Targe. "I can't make it", Ole answered. "You can if you jump twice over. Jump Ole," said Targe. Veena and Swamy again burst out laughing. Pyare Lal seems disconcerted.

Kunduz is a clean little town. It is coming up as a major industrial centre in this region. It has a ginning and a porcelain factory. A soap concern is now being set up. The area around is most fertile. I am reminded of the Punjab, lush green crops as far as the horizon, dotted with huts and small villages.

Somewhere between 1271 and 1274, Marco Polo passed from Kunduz on way to Badakhshan. He praised the fine breed of the horses in these parts and said that the countryside was the finest he had yet seen. I am reminded of the book, "After You Marco Polo." It was written by Jean Bowie Shor and was published in 1955. I had bought a copy in India before coming to Afghanistan. If I remember right the author had been rather uncharitable to the Afghans' in spite

of all the hospitality she got. I am surprised how can anyone be uncharitable to the Afghans.

We go and see the cotton factory. I have seen lots of them before. Veena is, however, interested. Porcelain factory is small but produces attractive pieces. They offer us some of them. But I refuse. They shall break on this long journey. We roam around the bazars and pay a visit to Badakhshan. An unimportant variety of carpets is manufactured there. We see a number of shops but I do not like any piece.

The Kunduz hotel is a fine one. Modern and up to date. It was originally built as a club for the Germans who helped in setting up the cotton ginning factory here. Later they converted it into a hotel.

In the evening I pay a visit to the local Gurudwara, the Sikh temple. It was an impromptu visit and so no one was there to receive me. Nor I had any intention to be received formally. But when the local Sikh population came to know about it they were all aflutter.

At about eight in the evening, Veena and I sit in the lounge. Pyare Lal has just booked a call for Kabul and we are waiting to be connected. The hotel-keeper walks in to say that five people are there to see me.

"Five of them? Who are they?"

"They are from the local Hindu and Sikh population."

An assembly of five is significant in the Sikh religion. Five people had been selected by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, to form a council of advisers and administrators. He had further enjoined that wherever five Sikhs assemble there is the spirit of the Guru. The decisions of the five selected Sikhs are binding on the whole congregation or the community. To night two Hindus and three Sikhs come to me. Hindus in Afghanistan normally attend the Sikh temples. They believe in the holy Granth as do many Hindus in the Punjab and innumerable Sindhis. When I come to know of their visit I feel small. Anyway I ask them to come in. I receive

them. Make them sit down. The *sarpanch* or the leader says:

"You visited our Gurudwara but we were not there to receive you."

I cut him short:

"But I did not wish to be received."

"It was our duty to give you a welcome as we did in Sultanpur."

He was in Sultanpur two years ago, when I had visited the Gurudwara there. The traditional welcome in a Gurudwara consists of an offer of *siropa*, a silken turban, some almonds, sugar-jam and cardamom.

"But...but it is most unnecessary."

I want to say that I don't deserve it. In fact I do not. I have so little faith in formalites of this nature.

"It is", the Hindu with a big turban continued the argument, "you are the first Sikh from the land of the five rivers who has come to Kunduz. We are so glad. We have brought for you the *siropa* if you would not come again to the Gurudwara."

They give me the *siropa*, the almonds, the sugar-jam and the cardamom. I stammer some thanks. I am deeply touched.

Ten thousand Sikhs and Hindus, mostly Sikhs, live in Afghanistan. Most of them are concentrated in Kabul and Nengerhar but a few are spread about all over the country.

The history of Sikhs and Hindus in this land can be traced back to the visit of the first Sikh Guru, Nanak Dev, to Afghanistan. The date of the visit is not certain but it can be stated, without doubt, that he visited this country on his way back from Mecca and Baghdad. According to an inscription installed in his memory, he appears to have visited Baghdad towards the end of 1520 and thus his sojourn in Afghanistan can be said to have taken place in early 1521. Nothing much is known of his itinerary but historical records indicate that he visited Kabul, Sultanpur and Nengerhar.

Some records are also available to show that he came to Kabul via Herat and Kandhar, the traditional route, but nothing is definitely known. A number of Hindus and Sikhs were brought by Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah from India to work as bankers and businessmen—an aspect of life in which the Afghans lacked the necessary skill. Many Sikhs settled around Sultanpur during the period of Sikh rule which extended upto the Khyber. Some of them came and settled during the successive British expeditions into Afghanistan. A few also came in during the communal disturbances which occurred in 1947, as a consequence of the division of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan.

The Guru Nanak temple in Kabul was possibly built towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was located where at present stands the square of Jad-i-Maiwand. The Khalsa temple or Khalsa Gurudwara in Kabul was built in the memory of Bhai Gurdas, a great Hindu saint, writer and philosopher who was a follower of Guru Har Gobind (1595-1644), the sixth Sikh Guru. Bhai Gurdas visited this place in connection with the purchase of horses for his Master and also to keep up cultural intercourse between the two countries. The Gurudwara possesses a handwritten copy of Shri Dasam Granth, a book of verse by the last Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, which dates back to 1712. The institution is run by a committee of the local Sikhs and Hindus. Other temples in Kabul are known as Gurudwara Baba Shri Chand, Dera Baba Gandhi Bux, Gurudwara Joti Sarup, Gurudwara Baba Gurbax Singh, Gurudwara Bhai Pirana, Gurudwara Guru Hari Rai Sahib and Gurudwara Bhai Mansa Singh.

But it is the Gurudwara at Sultanpur which is the most important Sikh shrine in Afghanistan, though in future it may give place to the Gurudwara under construction in Nengerhar. Sikhs and Hindus from all over Afghanistan still visit this place during Baisakhi. The gathering totals to approximately 5,000 people. The authorities help the Hindu

and Sikh communities in making necessary arrangements. This fair is a unique one and extremely well organised by a body known as Khalsa Diwan, composed of the Hindus and Sikhs of Nengerhar.

The Gurudwara at Nengerhar is also historical in the sense that Guru Nanak is supposed to have visited this place and stayed here for sometime. At present the Hindus and Sikhs are busy reconstructing the Gurudwara which is expected to cost approximately 20,00,000 Afghanis, that is, about four hundred thousand rupees.

Besides these big temples there are Hindu and Sikh places of worship at Herat, Ghazni, Kandhar, Kunduz and many other remote towns and villages. In Ghazni, for example, there are only twenty Sikh and Hindu families and in Herat only two, and yet these people have lived here for centuries unmolested, surrounded by an almost hundred per cent Muslim population. This is a miracle for which the Afghans are to be paid the highest tribute.

I sit and talk late to these people. I have told them a lie that I had had my dinner. They ask me questions about the Golden Temple at Amritsar and about Sri Anandpur Sahib. Are there any new editions of holy Granth, they ask me. I say yes, though I do not know for certain. One of them is planning to go to India to get a few copies. The present one is too old, they say. I request them to let me know if ever they come to India.

At about ten at night they depart. We have our dinner and I am pensive.

"You don't talk, papa."

"There is nothing the matter," I say.

But inwardly I am moved. When Veena is asleep, I write a poem. Generally I don't write poetry now. I used to once and that too in free verse. But today's meeting has filled me with deep emotions and nothing but poetry can do justice to it. Here is a free rendering of a few lines:

What is religion, and
The love of religion ?
Sikhism, and
The love of Sikhism ?
A new meaning I grasp
In the city of Kunduz today.
First time in the city of Kunduz
Surrounded by the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush
Has reached a Sikh from the Punjab
A Sikh with hair, turban and beard
And the entire community watches him walk,
talk and breathe.

A lost brother they find
Find after three hundred years
And they wish all and one to kiss him
Kiss his hands and feet,
To spend all their savings in entertaining him,
To hold him here as an idol
To shout with joy and shake the entire Himalayas.

An assembly of chosen five
Have brought me the *siropha* and a tray full
of almonds

But what am I worth,
Their love makes me feel so small.
I accept the gift
In the name of Sikhism
On behalf of the entire Punjab;
I wish a bit of their present
Is distributed to each Sikh and
Hindu in the Land of the Five Rivers.

VI

THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

NORMALLY people from Kunduz going to Mazar-i-Sharif travel via Pul-i Khumri. But one can also cut straight across the desert. It is almost half the distance though the time taken is twice as much if not more.

From Kunduz to Tashkurgan, fifty-eight kilometers short of Mazar, it is one long stretch of wilderness. Within an area of fourteen to fifteen thousand kilometers one hardly comes across a couple of hundred inhabitants. Even the nomads do not like this countryside. Though the grass grows tall and thick yet there is scarcity of water. Nomads must have water, if nothing else. There are no streams, rivulets or nalas. There are no towns and villages. In fact the entire belt along the river Oxus is barren and extremely thinly populated.

Who follows this route? Some officials once in a year or so but mostly the game hunters. The area is full of attractions for a shikari. Gazelles, deer and cheetahs, besides partridges are found in plenty. But you have to be careful. Unless the guide is a sure one you will be led astray. There is only one certain indication, the telephone poles strung with a single strand of wire which connect Kunduz with Tashkurgan. Then there are the two extremities, the Oxus in the north, the off-shoots of the Hindu Kush in the south.

If one is hunting one has per force to get away from the telephone poles. One has to do it even otherwise. The telephone poles are dug on the crow-flying route. But one cannot fly with a station wagon. Going round small hills one has to

follow the existing tracks. Tricky business again. These tracks may be of a hunter's jeep already led astray. Then possibly one is in for trouble. The view of river Oxus may be at the cost of the entire gasoline supply—quantity in the tank plus the spare.

I do not fully believe these difficulties. I have heard about them right back in Kabul but I do not take them seriously. I am not an expert navigator but experience as a soldier has given me some confidence. I do not easily lose my way. In the deserts as well as in the cities, I have a reliable sense of direction.

But Pyare Lal and Swamy are not so sure of themselves or of me. It is only yesterday that they have heard of the pitfalls of this route. When I sat talking to my visitors last night they were busy discussing such things with the other drivers plying on these routes. Somehow they had an inkling that I was going to follow this route. Swamy understands my whims. They, however, purposely did not discuss with me the route I was going to take.

Nonetheless I sense something in their behaviour as we are getting ready to go. Pyare Lal is serious. Swamy has a continuous grin on his face. I presume there has been an argument between them. Swamy must have suggested that I am going to cut across. Pyare Lal would have shaken his head in complete amazement. Emphatically he would have said that the Colonel cannot commit such a blunder. He would have wanted to say; he cannot be such a fool. Swamy would have laughed; you wait and see my chum.

As we are filling up the gasoline, Swamy asks me :

"It is only three hundred kilometers. I think one extra jerrican is enough."

"No, fill up both. It may be shorter or longer. Depends."

Swamy grins at Pyare Lal. The latter looks aside as if he has not heard.

We cover ten kilometers. The road bifurcates. One heads for Pul-i-Khumri and the other towards the desert. I am on the

wheel. I normally take my turn in the mornings. Swamy is a little slow and the morning hours though hopeless for study, are good for driving at speed. Besides, I sleep late at night. While travelling I almost finish a book a day. I therefore like to doze off at about mid-day. It is then that Swamy drives.

As I turn for the desert, Pyare Lal, from the rear seat, shouts:

"*Sahib, sahib*"

"Why?"

"This is not the road."

"Why; aren't we going to Mazar-i-Sharif?"

"Yes, but they go via Pul-i-Khumri."

I stop the car.

"*Sahib*, we may never reach Mazar," says Swamy.

"It is a dangerous route," adds Pyare Lal.

Then they speak alternately:

"Some people were stranded for a week."

"Two persons died. Three had gone in all. They lost the way. The gasoline finished. One of them came to get help and gasoline. Couldn't find his companions on return after two days. Driven by hunger and thirst the other two had, in the meantime, started walking aimlessly. They were ultimately found dead."

"*Mem sahib* said that we should look after the baby."

"All the drivers said it was not advisable at all."

I listened, thought and said:

"Let Veena decide!"

Veena had followed the trend of argument. She did not hesitate:

"I shall not go back to Patloo Mandi."

"Patloo Mandi? Where is that?"

"Oh! whatever you call it."

"You mean Pul-i-Khumri?"

"Of course, Yes. I don't want to go back. I want to see a desert. A real desert."

I looked at Pyare Lal and Swamy. The former was almost in tears.

On we headed for the desert.

I try to cheer up Pyare Lal. But is he cheered? Impossible. He is intently watching the telephone poles. The moment he loses sight of them, he gets jittery. He moves about too obviously in his seat. At times he cannot just conceal his anxiety.

"We don't see the poles!"

Once I deliberately go in a roundabout manner, keeping a hillock in front as a landmark. Pyare Lal thinks we are lost.

"I haven't seen the poles for a long time."

"Nor have I. I am looking out for them."

Pyare Lal sank.

"Let us go left. When I last saw them, that was the direction..."

There is a long harrassing argument. Swamy mutters:

"Left or right, Pyare Lal, it is sure death, I die with my Colonel sahib. I don't mind it."

But Pyare Lal minds it. He has promised his wife a carpet and kids a lot of dry fruit from Herat. And the fresh behis from Obe, near Herat.

The speed is slow. About twenty kilometers an hour. But I do not care. I am enjoying the scenery. I am thinking of the deserts of the Middle East and those trying days of the Second World War. How much distance would I have covered in those year? Could it be less than ten thousand kilometers a month? Up and down went the tide of the war, up and down did we go on fighting, on tour, on holiday, or aimlessly.

I tell Veena the stories of the deserts. Lack of water, absence of a living blade of grass, lack of towns and villages, lack of direction marks. But Veena is disappointed today.

"This doesn't look much of a desert, papa?"

"Why?"

"There is no sand."

"But all deserts are not sandy."

"Is it so?"

She is quiet. Again she asks:

"But papa, can a desert be green?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this desert is green for this month and for the next. But then you have a look at it, my dear girl. Not a living soul. And no water."

"You exaggerate, papa."

"If you would be stranded, you would know."

"Heavens forbid," cries Pyare Lal.

"I die with the Colonel sahib," grins Swamy.

At half past ten we have our tea. Then Swamy drives. I am not bothered about going astray. With Pyare Lal counting the poles, nothing can go wrong. I doze off. I wake up at half past twelve.

"You are a Kumbh Karan, papa," Veena remonstrates.

Anupama is nicknamed Kumbh Karan, the proverbial character in Ramayana, who sleeps for six months and then keeps awake for the same period.

Just then I spot some trees in the distance. Sleep has whetted my appetite. We get near them. There is a well also. Half a dozen people sit and chat. We join them. We have our lunch. A middle-aged Afghan wants a lift for a stretch of ten kilometers. There is another *sarai* or an inn there. King Abdur Rehman, the father of Amanullah, had once toured the country during his reign. Perhaps in 1908. He had followed almost the same route as I am doing today. He was preceded by an advance guard. They constructed *sarais*. These *sarais* are not elaborate. They consist of only a mud-wall encompassing a big piece of land. A sort of mud fortress. Deep wells were also dug. *Sarais* came up every ten or twelve kilometers. They have not been looked after since. The walls are dilapidated. But

still the sarais serve a great need. They are still the only index of measuring distance on these roads.

I offer a lift to this good-humoured Afghan. He tries to be amusing, to compensate for the lift we have given him:

"I have a big orchard at Tashkurgan and at Haibak. I own some land in Mazar and Herat also. In Mazar I have a big house."

"What were you doing here?"

"Just came to see a friend of mine."

"What are you going to do at the next *sarai*?"

"See another friend."

The next *sarai* came.

"Well bye-bye then," I say.

"Can't you take me to the next *sarai*?"

"Next *sarai*?"

"Yes!"

"What for?"

"I think I better see the other friend."

He is a nice man. I take him on. He comes right upto Tashkurgan. He asks us to his orchard. We politely decline. We, however, do go to see Tashkurgan. It is a large-sized town. Covered bazars and narrow streets. Veena is glad. I tell her of a covered bazar I had seen in Damascus during the Second World War.

"Why do they cover the bazars?"

"To protect themselves from rain, sun and snow!"

"Seems silly. Nothing wrong with the street being open to sky."

I also think so. But were the roofs really for the protection from rain, sun and snow? Was not the real reason an inborn sense of fear? All towns and villages used to have walls around them. Houses were also built like fortresses. Many of them had long tunnel-like entrances with underground rooms on either side. Mankind was fearful of even the open skies, especially at nights. The memory of

having once lived in the caves has not been forgotten by man, in some parts of the world, till today.

At Tashkurgan, the road from Pul-i- Khumri also joins. Pyare Lal smiles for the first time. How much blood have you lost; asks Swamy. Go on, don't kid, he answers.

We depart for Mazar. Who do we find outside the town waving for us ? Our Afghan friend.

"You want to go to the next *sarai* ?"

"Upto Mazar-i-Sharif, if you please."

"But what about your orchard. You had to..."

"No, no. My sons and nephews are doing the needful."

"What will you do in Mazar ?"

He warms up, as if he is angry:

"What will I do in Mazar ? Well, we do not go to Mazar to do anything. Mazar-i-Sharif is the greatest place of pilgrimage. We go there to pray. It falls only to the few to visit Mazar. Why did you ask me such a question ?"

I am not prepared for all this.

"Hop in," I say.

Twenty kilometers short of Mazar off-side wheel of the wagon saps. The tyre has a puncture. It puts me off. It has been hot and exhausting. I was looking forward to a relaxing bath and rest. It is already four in the evening and not much daylight is left. But there is no help. We get off. During the course of changing the spare wheel I notice something else. One of the leaves of the suspension springs is broken. No wonder I had felt for sometime that driving is uneasy. I point out my discovery to Swamy. He mutters:

"Oh God ! Oh God."

Pyare Lal is shocked :

"Heavens be praised ! We are out of the desert. What would have happened otherwise."

When we start again the speed is only fifteen kilometers an hour.

At Mazar our Afghan friend enquires about our future programme. We do not know, we say.

Was this gentleman lured by the joy of travel ? But there is no doubt that there are thousands who have no inclination to work. It is the same in my country. Thousands are idle all the year round. Millions only work for about six months a year. Religion and social ceremonies keep most of them busy for long periods. They travel long distances to visit places of pilgrimage. A fortnight on a trip is the average time taken.

There was a time when I found a poetic excuse for this widespread idleness. It was a view of life. But today I think differently. On this path lies no progress, no prosperity. We have to work solid eight hours a day, if not more. We have to create, including work. The whole nation must set to work. Prosperity will come to us through work alone.

VII

BALKH—THE MOTHER OF CITIES

THE 'Avesta' describes the glory of Bhalika in these terms : *Bahdim Sariram Ordovo Darafsham* (*Bhalika*, the beautiful city of High Flags.)

After Yama who, as has been said before, was the first king of the Aryans and who ruled at Balkh, Kawikwata or Kaykvat founded the dynasty of Kavas. He was succeeded by Kava-Syusan whose life story is connected with the legend of Anahita, the Goddess of the Rivers. The Aspa dynasty was founded by Lahr-aspa who was succeeded by his two sons, Wesht-aspa and Gewht-aspa.

Zrathustra was born in 1,000 B. C. at Balkh and it is said that he was related to the royal family of Aspa. Zrathustra's contribution to the philosophical thought of the world is considerable. He was perhaps the first to propound that man could find salvation through pure thought. He preached that one must do good if one wants to live happily in this world and the next. He added that not only should a man do good but he should also stand by his principles. There was nothing new in his preaching as compared to Aryan teachings but the impact of Zrathustra's personality was great and was felt for a long time. His teachings were later incorporated in the Avesta, the original text of which is supposed to have been destroyed by Alexander the Great. Avesta was rewritten during the time of Sassanids. The five parts of Avesta are entitled Yasna, Visprel, Vendidad, Yasht and Khorda-Avesta.

After the Aryan dynasty of Aspa the Achaemenians of Persia came into power in Balkh. Cyrus managed to secure the city but it was only after much stiff resistance lasting five years (549-545 B. C.). Balkh could not have developed to any great degree under the Persians as the rule of the earlier Aspa dynasty was sound and much more up to date from practically every point of view. The Persian rule was feudalistic in form and there were frequent insurrections in all parts of the empire.

It was perhaps for this reason that Alexander found it easy to break up the Persian Empire. Balkh was being then ruled by Bessus.

Alexander reached here via the Khawak Pass in the spring of 327 B. C. and laid the city waste. Alexander went away but the Greeks stayed on. They freely intermingled with the local population and eventually one Euthytemus (220-190 B. C.) founded the first Greco-Bactrian kingdom. By about the beginning of the Christian era the Greco-Bactrian rule declined. Hermaeus (45-20 B. C.) was their last king.

The Greco-Bactrian rule lasted for nearly two hundred years and Greek art and philosophy exerted a deep influence during this period. Little trace, however, remains today of the Greek colonisation except in the coins which have been recently discovered.

About this time Buddhism from India reached Balkh as it did reach many other parts of the world. Gradually Greco-Bactrian art gave place to Greco-Buddhist art and in a few hundred years the civilisation was completely Buddhist. Kanishka (120-160) also known as the Prince of Kandahar was the torch-bearer of this new culture and civilisation.

This period was the greatest in the history of Balkh. The spread of Buddhism had opened all roads and had united different countries in an emotional and cultural bond. Balkh, of all the cities, benefited most. Because of its

geographical situation it became a centre of the world trade. The merchants transported their goods over the Oxus river to the Black Sea and to the Mediterranean. Roads from here led to China, to India and to Persia. It was a meeting place of the East and the West. Balkh has risen and fallen time after time but the glory that she saw in the first few centuries of the Christian era was never surpassed.

For a time then the Ephthalites came into power and destroyed much that was beautiful in Balkh. Monasteries were erased and fine pieces of sculpture wasted. Yet when in the seventh century Huan-Tsang visited Balkh he found that the city could still boast of a hundred monasteries. He found it still retaining something of the past glory and was much impressed by its beauty and fertile land.

Then started the era of Islam and of Arab conquests. Whatever was left of Buddhism in these parts was further destroyed and Balkh lost its glory as well as its importance as a clearing house of knowledge, culture and trade. It may be of interest to note that as late as the tenth century there were some Turkish chieftains north of Balkh who were devout Buddhists.

In the twelfth century great Tamujan or Chengiz Khan led an army of two hundred thousand men into Afghanistan. Balkh was ruined. Still surviving traces of Buddhism and the newly created mosques of Islam were all destroyed. The inhabitants were massacred. From here he sent an army to destroy Herat and himself crossed the Hindu Kush by Ak Robot Pass.

Following the Mongols we get a glimpse of the situation in this part of the world by the writing of Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta. Marco Polo was journeying from Acre to the court of Kublai Khan, grandson of Chengiz Khan, between 1271-1275. He passed through Balkh and found it still "a noble and a great city." No doubt it was ruined but from these ruins one could judge its past magnificence. Ibn Batuta passed through Balkh in 1333 on his way to India. He found

the city deserted and completely in ruins though in his opinion Herat had recovered from the ravages of a century ago. Ibn Batuta found the remains of Bagram very painful to watch; Kabul reduced to only a village and Ghazni to only a fraction of what it must have been before.

Mongol domination of these parts came to an end soon. By fourteenth century Tamerlane (1332-1404) ruled Balkh from his famous capital of Samarkand. In 1403 one Clavijo, Ambassador of Henry III of Castile, visited Tamerlane's court. He also saw Balkh. Clavijo found the inner city of Balkh still inhabited though the area between the inner and the outer ramparts had been divided into fields where cotton was being grown. He also noted the interesting fact that the Oxus formed the linguistic frontier between the Turki and the Persian speaking people.

The next famous man of history to be associated with Balkh is Babur. Born in Farghana his ambition was to capture Samarkand. To fulfil this ambition he came to Balkh to seek help but eventually failed though only to found the Moghul empire in India. Even from India, Babur kept an eye on Balkh and Badakhshan. His son Humayun ruled in Faizabad and one of his Timurid kinsmen, in Balkh. Gradually, however, when Babur got settled in India, Balkh passed on to the Uzbeks. The Moghul ambition for their ancestral land again woke up in Jehangir's time and he sent his son Murad across Hindu Kush to recover the lost possessions. Murad occupied Balkh and Termez which remained in Moghul hands till 1647. But Uzbeks reasserted themselves in 1648 and the Imperial Moghul armies retired for ever from the Oxus. From then on the historical scene shifts to southern Afghanistan and centres round the city of Kandhar.

As one starts from Mazar-i-Sharif to see the Mother of Cities one cannot but regurgitate the events of the past two to three thousand years, whatever little one may know about them. Mazar-i-Sharif to Balkh, a journey of twenty

kilometers, is dreary. For a couple of kilometers one does not mind it inasmuch as one finds oneself still in the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif, but as this town is left behind and there is no trace of anything else one starts wondering a little. What has happened to the green and rich fields of cotton and wheat which Huan-Tsang had noticed in the seventh and Marco Polo in the thirteenth century? All that one sees now is an arid desert.

Near Balkh there are certain mounds and broken chips of pottery as one finds them around Delhi or other ancient cities and that is all.

The outer rampart of Balkh which Clavijo had noticed in 1403 still remains though much dilapidated. One can even get on to the top of this rampart and view the surrounding country from a still existing tower. Within this outer rampart is the modern village of Balkh. Inhabited by about two thousand people it is the seat of a very petty official from the northern district of Mazar-i-Sharif. The people are the same as found anywhere else in these parts. However much you may accost them they will never betray any knowledge of the past history of Balkh. On their faces you will not find any streak showing that they are conscious of the one time glory of their village.

The ruins of Balkh are imposing. A vast area literally littered with stones and bricks and junk and pieces of pottery lies around you. The jeep can go anywhere except on one or two of the highest mounds. The ground is hard.

It will be necessary to walk up to one of these high mounds to have a better view. From there in the south you see the dilapidated outer rampart of Balkh and in the north with powerful binoculars the river Oxus. Perhaps if you see longer and intently you may see Babur struggling hard to save his life in the waves of this river or the Mongol Chengiz Khan leading his hordes across or Alexander thoughtfully planning one of his unusual stratagems. For there is

nothing to see and admire except the beauty of the ruins and the grandeur of history.

There are some trees in the present village of Balkh but little else is grown. There are some fields but the quality of crops is poor. The water is distinctly distasteful. When you ask why, the answer is interesting and striking—the only indication of the knowledge of the past by the locals. They say this taste is the taste of the bones of those millions of people who have lived and perished here.

With such a taste we return to Mazar. Veena is impressed. Imposing ruins, she goes on repeating. Greater and grander than the ruins of Surkh Kotal. What Veena cannot understand is the reasons for the boundaries existing between two countries and the differences of creeds and nationalities. Looking at the Oxus through the binoculars she asks :

“How did this river become a boundary between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union ? ”

I know the answer. I know of the terrible stresses and strains, of intense rivalry, of bitter struggles, of dreadful wars and battles, of political blackmails and forgeries; which created the international boundaries in the world in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

This period of two centuries was most significant and profound in the history of the world. This was the time when the world started to become modern in the sense we understand it today. Science and scientific progress became the basis of mankind's existence and developments in this field revolutionised every aspect of life. The pace of advancement became so fast that it outstripped even the wildest dreams of man. Europe was the torch-bearer of this new, scientific outlook on life. This outlook was soon to make Europe the master of the world. The renaissance followed by the industrial revolution had set the pace.

The East, unfortunately, was stagnating in this period of the world's history. In India the Moghul Empire had

broken, in China the central authority was weak, in South East Asia there was no coherence and in Central Asia, the only man worth mentioning was Ahmed Shah Durrani, the founder of modern Afghanistan. The pattern of power and politics was changing so fast that the rise of conquerors like Chengiz and Tamerlane was no more possible. Besides Europe, Russia was also extending her empire and we can easily discern the changes that were to take place there. Gone were the days when a conqueror from the steppes of northern China could blow to the winds like chaff the powerful forces in Europe and other parts of Asia. Europe had risen to repeat the exploits of Alexander of Macedonia and avenge what she had suffered at the hands of Asiatic Chengiz and the Arab conquerors. Maurice Collis, while discussing Alexander in his "Marco Polo" writes, "We have to remember that no other European had been able to accomplish so much; even the Great Roman Empire had stopped at the Euphrates. Now a days, the feats of Alexander hardly move us, because we have seen all Asia fall under our power. But in the thirteenth century, particularly after the Mongol invasions and the sack of Europe by those Orientals, Alexander's reputation was at a dizzy height. Although there had been a pause in the invasions and the Mongols seemed to be settling down, the danger remained that they may attack again. How wonderful, therefore, to think that once a European had succeeded, not only in marching victoriously as far as Balkh, but in planting a kingdom there, an outpost of Europe against the dwellers of the steppe."

But this was now the eighteenth century and Europe was on the march. In the years to come the world, under the leadership of the Europeans, was to witness the greatest advances ever made in science, philosophy, arts of all kinds, culture and civilisation though at the same time, ironically, mankind had to witness also the basest and the meanest in man. The cruelties and slaughter of the two

world wars matches if not beats, the butchery and ferocity of the great Mongol and the so-called cruel Orientals.

The year 1747, when Ahmed Shah Durrani became the king of Afghanistan, was the same year, by a strange coincidence, in which the European nations started on their march of conquest in Asia. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British had already been in the field with their guns, ships, trade and missionaries for nearly two hundred years in Asia but till 1747 they were considered clever though most uncouth and uncultured by the Indians and 'barbarians' by the Chinese and the South East Asians. Till 1747 they were gradually digging their feet in but one would be surprised if they themselves were conscious of the destiny that awaited them, nor had they guessed that they were going to be so richly rewarded in the near future. Starting from 1747 and for the next hundred years the above named four European nations were to divide the rich soil of Asia among themselves and prepare for an easy rule over their territories for another century.

No nation or country in Asia could be considered free from the influence of Europe from now on and Afghanistan is no exception. In fact Afghanistan was very much involved due to her geographical position, as the guardian of the safety and security of the British Empire in India.

The first Afghan War in 1838, with the consequent victory of the British over the Afghans and their influence at Kabul, had spurred the Russians to move faster in Central Asia. As early as 1840 they had sent an expedition against Khiva and were intent upon going as far forward as the Sea of Aral. In 1864 they reached the line of the Jaxartes river on the one side and the Caspian Sea on the other. By 1875 they consolidated Tashkent and Samarkand. It was obvious that soon they would be at the Oxus river. The British, on the other hand, after their first successes were equally active. The Sind and the Punjab had been annexed. The famous Sikh Empire of Maharaja

Ranjit Singh had been crushed. In 1877, war broke out between Turkey and Russia. The question of the control of Dardanelles led to considerable friction between Britain and Russia. The fleets of both these nations faced each other and if there had been a war, it would have no doubt spread to Central Asia and inevitably to Afghanistan. There would have been a race to cross the Hindu Kush by either party. However the danger passed and in July 1878 the issues were decided at the Congress of Berlin.

Between 1884 and 1887 the Russians and the British were again at loggerheads regarding their spheres of influence in Central Asia. Most important to both of them was Afghanistan, with the strategic Hindu Kush running through it. Both powers were anxiously trying to find ways and means by which they could cross this mountain and spread their influence farther afield. The Russians, during this period, were trying to take as much of the territory north of the Oxus as they could conveniently do. The annexation of Turkmen brought them very near Herat which was resented by the British. Both countries were at the brink of war when a protocol was signed at St. Petersburg in July 1887. The British agreed not to have any territorial ambitions in Afghanistan beyond the influence that they had already got and the Russians undertook to respect the river Oxus as the boundary between them and the Afghans. The remaining boundaries yet undemarcated were also agreed upon and a joint commission undertook this task from 1895 onwards.

I know all that. But what use is it to tell Veena? Still she insists. She is not easily convinced. When I give her a vague answer she is touched to the quick.

"What do you think you are papa? You think you are the only one who can understand things."

I have no answer to this. Nor any answer to her original question. Similar was my dilemma when we crossed into Pakistan from India some years ago. For my daughters this was this first trip abroad. They had heard something of the

division of the undivided India and the creation of Pakistan. But nothing was definite or precise in their minds. They were nevertheless excited at visiting another country. But as the train from Attari entered Pakistan near Wagah they failed to notice any difference. There were no boundary pillars.

"We are in a foreign country?" Rohini asked.

"Yes."

She wondered. She could not understand the difference but was afraid of asking any question. The question perhaps could not formulate in her mind. Her sense of wonder however was great. After some hesitation she stammered:

"But there is hardly any difference. Similar crops, similar people, everything is the same."

"We were one country only a few years ago, you know."

"Then why this division?"

"Why these divisions in the world at all?" Veena interposed.

I had no answer. They will grow up and know, I thought.

We reach our none-too-worthy hotel in Mazar and check up the spring leaves of the wagon. The welder has done a good job. I hope the journey will be successful. Pyare Lal is, however, depressed. He did not know what he was bargaining for when he volunteered to accompany me. It has been suggested by him in a roundabout way that a trip to Herat via Maimana is not a sound proposition. There is no compensation for the hazards of the journey. I listen to him but I know my mind.

VIII

A DULL DAY

COGITO, *ergo sum*; (I think, therefore I am). I find an inherent contradiction in this assertion. Descartes had decided to apply the 'mathematical' or the 'reasonable' method to all material and metaphysical problems. It was the method of direct and personal observation and his philosophy came to be known as Cartesianism. Intellect and observation were to be the beginning and the end. The supernatural aspect of life and the tenets of the Christian faith were to be discarded. Galileo had also applied similar standards and as such had faced the Inquisition in 1633. Three quarters of a century before, Nicolas Copernicus had written a treatise and suggested that sun, rather than the earth, was the centre of our universe. Copernicus, however, did not publish his theory till he was dying.

But then Galileo and Copernicus were scientists and Descartes a philosopher. Galileo and Copernicus denied the Book of Genesis. Their theories were uncompromising. Descartes, on the other hand, opposed religion on a philosophical plain. One might say he did not oppose the Christian faith at all. Although his methods were those of a scientist his findings were couched in words which did not go contrary to religion.

"I think, therefore I am," underlines the existence of a thought process, a process invisible to the eye and not capable of being directly felt or observed. Schopenhauer's cryptic dictum, *Volo, ergo sum*; (I will, therefore I am), also lends itself to the same contradiction. Thinking and willing may

merely be the proof of only the ability to think and will and may have nothing to do with existence ? Descartes had said that seeing is believing but can one see the process of thinking ? Yet think one must.

There is nothing that you can do on your journey from Mazar-i-Sharif to about thirty kilometers short of Maimana but think. True, it is not as much a desert as is spread between Kunduz and Tashkurgan but then there is only the difference of a degree. Some streams cross the road at intervals and at these places small villages have sprung up. That is all that distinguishes one hundred and forty-six kilometers from Mazar-i-Sharif to Shibargan. I love wilderness but I love it only for a day or so. I love to whiz through it. I may even like to have a holiday there for a couple of days equipped with a tent and some necessities. But in the manner I am crossing it, one is bound to get bored. There is hardly any change.

When I get bored with the surroundings, I think, perhaps everyone does so. I think of "The Plague" and "The Outsider" of Albert Camus. I had read them in Mazar. I did not like "The Plague." The story nowhere reaches a climax. The manner of description lands one in the eighteenth century. No character stands out. The bewilderment of the citizens at the outbreak of plague is unconvincing. In fact the whole affair seems to me to be unconvincing. Even the symbolic meaning of drawing a parallel with the German occupation of France during the World War II falls flat. I compare them with the other modern writings of the day.

Currently I am writing a series of four novels. They cover the history of the Punjab and particularly of the Sikhs from 1710 to 1849. I have finished the first two already; *Khanion Tikkhi* (Sharper than the Blade) and *Walon Nikki*, (Thinner than a Hair). Now I am working at the third one, *Et Marg Jana*, (This Path Shall be Followed). I have brought the manuscript with me. Perhaps I could work on it. I have not found any time so far. It has been busy and

tiring. But today my mind goes to the novel in hand. I think of the next chapter.

My thoughts also wander across the Oxus. This is the land of the Soviets. Prabhjot and myself had holidayed there two years ago. Brigadier and Mrs. N. D. Nanavati were the perfect hosts at Moscow and had planned our visits to Leningrad and other places. Not very far from the Oxus is Tashkent, the biggest and most modern town in Central Asia. Prabhjot has also been to Samarkand and Bokhara. She has told me stories of these parts.

We intend visiting Europe later in the year. We have provisionally fixed 12th June as the date of departure from Kabul. The rough itinerary has also been drawn. The journey will take us to a dozen lands of Europe and West Asia. We plan to return by the overland route through Turkey and Iran. I think of the trip. Cancel some decisions already made. Change and rechange the programme. I plan the foreign exchange. I have forgotten to write to some friends in Paris. Sen in West Berlin had completely gone off my mind. I must write to him when I get back.

Prabhjot and Rohini at Kabul must be thinking of us. Prabhjot was really worried when I spoke to her last night on the telephone. Everyone in Kabul says that the trip is not worth it in an old station wagon, she told me. Would I consider the possibility of returning from Mazar ; or why did not I fly to Maimana and to Herat ? But how can I ? I have already flown to Mazar, Herat and Kandhar. I want to see what lies in between.

There are friends in India who are spotlighted in my thoughts. I must construct my house in the Defence Colony, Delhi. Otherwise the plot will be confiscated. I have already drawn some loan from my Provident Fund. But what about the rest ? Where shall I be posted when I return to India ?

I think. I think of a thousand things. I think, therefore I am.

Pyare Lal sits behind. When he is not talking to Swamy he is quiet. Does not even move about much. His hands lie in his lap motionless. The eyes are set. Do not they wink? His lips do not move. He seems to be looking in the distance. Is he practising yoga? Devoted to abstruse problems. Perhaps he is. I break his meditation. I ask him :

"What are you thinking, Pyare Lal?"

He returns to the earth. Drily he answers :

"Nothing. What is there to think?"

"Still."

I do want to get at the back of his mind.

"Nothing."

'But you must be. Tell me. I want to know it.'

"I was thinking when we will reach Shibargan."

He is not joking. I am sure that is what he was thinking. He does not go far into the future. The limit upto the evening is enough. At times he may reach Kabul to see his wife and children, proudly showing them the carpet he has purchased.

I look at Swamy and ask him the same question.

"What are you thinking Swamy?"

A broad grin shows his white teeth. The contrast with his black complexion is heightened.

"I don't think *sahib*."

"What do you mean? Each one of us thinks. That is why we are human beings. That is why we exist."

He laughs. I must be joking.

"I don't know what thinking is."

"Nevertheless, there must be something in your mind."

"I want to drink water at the next village."

Memories, however, come crowding upon me. They come in waves. I will be overwhelmed, I fear. But they spread themselves as on the sandy sea-shores. My mind is perhaps porous. It absorbs. Memories of Kania Bungalow, where I was born; of Jaranwala and Lahore, where I was educated; of the years in the Army; of the places I have seen;

the people I have met. Memorable scenes. Some memorable words by friends and acquaintances. Then the memories split themselves. Now the fragments again form a mosaic. Now come the thoughts of the future. How far do they go? Right till I lie on my deathbed. In what form it will come to me, this death? How long shall I live? I have enough to do for years to come.

The pistons in the engine go up and down in a predetermined movement. The gasoline becomes power. The power is transmitted to the wheels. The wheels move the wagon. The wagon carries us. We are on way to Shibargan.

Veena is the only one who is not bored. She has a zest to see. Her eyes are wide open. Her senses wide awake. She imbibes each scene. Each turn of the road interests her. She is always expecting to come by something new. When I am thoughtful I do not attend to her. She does not mind it for some time but constant neglect annoys her. She wants to be looked after. She asks questions. How many questions have I already answered? A hundred thousand, if not more. By the time we return to Kabul I would have answered a million. She has a question on every conceivable subject in the world. From the steering wheel and the gear lever visible in front of us to the space ships.

Between here and Maimana are reared the best sheep in Afghanistan. The famous Karakuls are the product of Mazar-Maimana belt. There are flocks of them on either side of the road. I have photographed a few. I wish I could take good photographs. I cannot. I have not enough time to practise photography.

There is a hut by the side of the road. We also see a small running stream. We stop. A bearded Afghan greets us. A pleasant face, overflowing with affection.

"What do you do?"

"I rear the best sheep in the provinces of Mazar-i-Sharif and Maimana."

"Really?"

"Of course. If you wait a bit my sons and nephews will be returning with the flock. I have told them to come about this time today."

"How many Karakul skins you produce a year?"

"Well! Let me see. I can't count exactly. But a lot!"

"How many. Tell me roughly."

"Say, five hundred!"

He invites us to the hut. I enter. There are a few clothes in one corner. Another corner houses the paraphernalia for cooking. The third corner has a pitcher of water. The last one has some instruments connected with carving the sheep and producing the Karakul skin of the unborn lamb.

"What poverty?" Veena involuntarily mutters.

But this man produces one of the most expensive items in the world. Five hundred Karakul skins would fetch in the United States or Europe an equivalent of twenty five thousand rupees. However, this old man with his sons and nephews barely subsists.

We reach Shibargan about midday. The journey has not been strenuous. There is a mediocre hotel. The town is old and worn-out. Shibargan has recently become the capital of a lately created province by the same name. An assistant governor has been appointed. The people are happy. It is a sort of promotion for all the four thousand inhabitants.

Eighty kilometers south of Shibargan is Sar-i-Pul. They are prospecting oil there. I had heard reports that the signs are hopeful. I had decided to visit Sar-i-Pul. But I changed my mind today. It is not possible to do hundred and sixty kilometers after lunch and then be back at a decent hour for dinner. It is neither worthwhile staying another day to visit Sar-i-Pul. Pyare Lal is delighted at my decision. To Swamy it does not matter. Veena pulls a long face.

"At Putloo-Mandi you had promised to show me oil-prospecting."

"At where?"

"At Putloo-Mandi."

"What?"

She realises her mistake.

"Oh! Whatever you call it."

"Pul-i-Khumri you mean."

"Why do you ask me if you know it. Okay, I will call it Putloo-Mandi. Now and always. So there."

Good God, how angry Veena is.

Anyhow I send my best wishes to the people working at Sar-i-Pul. I hope they succeed. Afghanistan needs oil, coal, gold, uranium, copper. Everything. I am sure it is all there. All the riches of the earth. Gradually they will discover them all as we are now doing in India. Work. Ceaseless work. A restless, striving soul, that is what a nation needs.

In the evening I sit outside the hotel building and write a chapter of my novel. As dusk falls the attendant brings me a hurricane lamp. I continue working. The moon rises late. I think of the days of childhood when all school work was done by the hurricane lamp. Only a few towns in the Punjab were then electrified. I was used to it then. It did not make much difference. But now I am almost blind in this light. I grope. So does Veena. I am used to electricity now. It is all a matter of getting used to things. But you get used to better things quickly. To return to lower standards is painful, disgusting.

The cook has prepared chicken. I had asked him to roast it without any local margarine which has a peculiar smell. But he has still used it. I take out some tinned fish. It is difficult feeding on this route. Vegetables are scarce. The meat is cooked only by one method. The bread has only one variety.

Shibargan is warm. Yet we sleep inside. Veena must

not catch chill. I remember the warning of her mother. Even after three hours of work on the novel I am not tired. I feel like studying. I do. But now the kerosene oil finishes. Off goes the lamp. I lie in bed. I think; therefore I am.

IX

WE REACH MAIMANA AFTER ALL

ON Sunday we start at five in the morning. Our destination for the day is Maimana. By the route we want to take, the distance is only hundred and forty kilometers. But if we are led astray it may be much more. Early start is a margin for a loss of direction.

Unfortunately that is what happens. The plan was to cut short and make for Daulatabad through the desert known as Dasht-e-Lili. By seven, however, we were only a couple of kilometers from Shibargan. The hotel-keeper who had come with us to show us the route had himself made a mistake. Round and round we went in circles. But every path we followed came to a dead end.

"Let us return to Shibargan and go by way of Andkhui," Pyare Lal insisted.

"It is a good game of hide and seek," remarked Veena.

"Shall we have gasoline enough to reach Andkhui," was Swamy's fear.

It is wise to be wise in time, I thought. I asked the next person who crossed us the way to the Shibargan-Andkhui road. A vague direction was given and I followed it.

Can one believe it ? It took us two hours to cover a distance of fifteen kilometers. There was a track. Was it really a track ? Who used it ? There is no vehicular traffic around here. There are no bullock carts as in India. Then what

for was this path ? How it came to look like one ? I do not know. Yet a road, a track or a prepared path it did seem.

At ten we reached the road to Andkhui. We had covered only forty kilometers from Shibargan.

The main road was no better. Some of the bits were rocky. Quite a few bits sandy. A couple of lorries a day use the track. Just this much traffic over a period of years has hardened the surface and deep furrows have appeared. It is impossible to get away from them. On the other hand these are too deep for the jeep. We just manage.

Andkhui is reached at one in the afternoon. The total distance between Shibargan and Andkhui is sixty-five kilometers.

All of us are hungry. There is no hotel worth the name. One that exists is about three kilometers west of the town. We have no heart to do even three-hundred meters more.

In the middle of the bazar, consisting of a few shops, we sit down and open our lunch box. Nothing is available at the Andkhui restaurants. We are happy that we brought some bread with us. It was Pyare Lal who had thought of it. I tell him:

“You have a wonderful foresight.”

“I gave my word to *mem sahib* that I will look after you all.”

Yes, Prabhjot is keen that we always travel well provided with food and water. I may miss these instructions but Pyare Lal and Swamy try to do their best. The whole town has surrounded us in the meantime. Off and on foreigners of all sorts do come here; but this is the first time a Sikh is here. A Sikh with nicely tied turban, beard and a pair of jeans. Perhaps we are the first Indians to come to this town. We speak Persian almost as good as the Afghans do. The town certainly is surprised. Each one of them wants to talk, to ask about the aim of our journey, to enquire about our families and our country.

We hurry up with our lunch and get into the interior

of the town to have a look at the carpets. Andkhui is famous for them. We visit shop after shop. The pattern and variety is however limited. I choose a piece. There is considerable haggling over price. But eventually the deal is struck. We get it packed and load it in the wagon.

Before we leave, we try to find out about the condition of the road. The policeman says:

"Why, what is wrong with the road?"

"We just wanted to find out about the going."

"Oh, I see. Well, gentlemen, the going is good."

"Really good?"

"Of course, really good."

"Well, is it better than the track between Shibargan and Andkhui?"

"Well, what was wrong with the road between Shibargan and Andkhui?"

We now guess the shape of things to come and need no further questioning.

It is my turn to drive. I ask Swamy and Pyare Lal to sleep:

"The day is going to be long and weary."

"We can see it," says Pyare Lal.

Veena is busy with her enquiries:

"How far is Oxus from here?"

"The Oxus is going north on its course but the border with the Soviet Union is not very far."

"How far?"

"Well, about thirty kilometers."

"Why can't you be definite, papa. I don't like words like about and approximately," she admonishes me, "these people are different from those in Kabul and around. Aren't they?"

"Not very much. Still there are differences. Just as there are differences among people in different parts of India."

The people inhabiting the area between Kunduz and

Maimana are generally Uzbeks. They are the descendants of Turkish tribes. They number about one million out of a total population of ten millions or so. No one knows the figures for certain as no census has ever been taken. Tajiks, numbering about two and a half millions, are settled on either side of the Hindu Kush, especially in the Panjsher valley and the upper valleys of the river Oxus. Some of them also live around Bamian. They can be stated to be the descendants of the primitive Persian inhabitants. Nearly four millions of the people belong to the Pathan group of tribes. Through their Durrani tribe they provide the present day rulers of Afghanistan. They are concentrated in eastern and southern Afghanistan. Hazarahs, numbering nearly a million, are the descendants of the Mongols and inhabit the central tracts of Afghanistan, known as Hazarajat.

I rattle off these facts to Vecna and then I tell her about the Nooristanis, a small but interesting race. They inhabit a small area north-east of Nengerhar. Many theories have been advanced during the past century about their antiquity. Some have suggested that they are Dravidian aborigines, who gradually concentrated in South India as the Aryan conquest advanced. Others say that they are the descendants of the Greeks who came here with Alexander. It may be worthwhile to note that Alexander had to fight one of the toughest battles of his long campaign in these hills and some of his soldiers refused to go any further. Many more revolted when the legendary battle took place with King Porus near Jehlum. There is thus some basis to suggest that the Nooristanis may have racial connections with the Greek. The theory of their being Dravidian or original inhabitants of Central Asia is based on the fact that the Nooristanis did not profess Islam and that some of their beliefs and customs seem common with the Dravidians. Their religion is a form of idolatry and they have numerous gods and goddesses. There are also traces of fire worship. Polygamy is a common feature and women have no place in society.

Due to their different religion they were known as infidels or *Kafirs* by the rest of the people of Afghanistan. They also remained semi-independent till the end of the nineteenth century when King Abdur Rehman subdued them. Soon after, by his persistent efforts, they were converted to Islam and *Kafiristan* came to be known as Nooristan and the *Kafirs* as Nooristanis. Since then they have contributed their mite to the progress of the country. There are many Nooristanis in the armed forces. They make fine soldiers and are very pleasant to mix with. A visit to Afghanistan cannot be called complete unless one sees these people in their own picturesque surroundings.

It is estimated that roughly one third of the entire population of the country is settled in towns. The *Kh'ud* or *Zai* represents a group which occupies a common locality or one whose members live in close proximity to one another and, may be, hold common land. The senior of these groups provides the *Khan* or the Chief and he is invested with patriarchial or dynastic powers. He is known as *Khan Khel*. The third group in the ladder is the *Kahol* or the family group whose members, as the name applies, are kinsmen of one another. In chance cases some alien tribes also get affiliated with the main tribes and they are then called *minum* or *hamsaya*. These alien groups undertake to stand by the main group throughout.

The son, born of true wedlock, inherits the property of his father. Others, born of unmarried women, are only entitled to a bare subsistence. Heredity is not always practised. The imbeciles and useless are often passed over by the more energetic and bolder types. Indeed this has been the basis on which kings have occupied the throne of Kabul, though now the practice is to vest the kingship or leadership of the tribe in the eldest son.

In times of stress and strain the principle of heredity is particularly disregarded and the members of a tribe flock round one who is most able to lead and guide them. It is

also possible that this leader may not belong to that particular group which has normally provided the chiefs till then. Women also play a great part in the life of the community and are extremely hardworking and frugal.

Veena does not know why I am volunteering so much information to her. The real reason is that I am feeling sleepy. I need to talk. Pyare Lal and Swamy are both snoring in the back-seat. They present a strangely comic spectacle. Their legs inter-twine. Pyare Lal's head rests on the newly bought carpet. Swamy is leaning against the spare jerrican. They can remain sleeping like this till eternity. I would have wished Veena to sleep as well. She only dozed off for an hour or so before Andkhui. For a child of ten it is a long time to be awake since four in the morning. But I cannot let her sleep. It is tricky driving here when you are only half-awake. At times I wish to park the car and lay a while in the shade of some tree, if I can find one. I dare not however. The journey is still long and the sun is fast declining in the west.

At six in the evening we reach Daulatabad. Sixty-eight kilometers in four hours. Daulatabad is famous for carpets; or rather Daulatabadi carpets are famous. When we reached the town there was not a single shop selling carpets. These are manufactured in the villages around, they tell us. Once in ten days they bring them to the village when dealers from Kabul and Kandhar do their purchases. I am glad there are no shops selling carpets here. I could not have resisted the temptation to look at them and that would have delayed us.

The wonder of wonders ! Sixteen kilometers beyond Daulatabad the track improves. It is really a road now. A metalled road. One can almost drive upto forty kilometers an hour. Can one imagine the sense of relief? I sit back and relax. I breathe the fresh evening air. What an invigorating smell ! I stop the wagon and ask the passers-by about it. The smell is from the fruit-trees of *sindget*. The desert has been left behind. There are green crops and rivulets cutting across

the road. I am no longer tired. I have forgotten, the dull, dreary, and exhausting day. I am happy, full of spirits.

X

A LATE NIGHT

I sit in the lawn outside the Hotel Maimana. It is a pleasant morning, sunny and lukewarm. I had a comfortable night and I feel refreshed. Pyare Lal and Swamy have gone with the wagon to the bazar. We had found a flat tyre this morning. I have instructed them to get the jeep serviced as well. Veena is busy drawing a scene.

I sit with "The Beat Generation And the Angry Young-men." This is one of the recent collections of short stories edited by Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg. Two dozen writers are represented in the collection. I have read some of the famous ones before. like Jack Kerouac, John Osborne, John Wain, Norman Mailer, Kingsley Amis. These two schools can be considered to represent the most important current literary trends in Europe and America. They dilate upon the contradictions and confusion in the present-day world. Contradictions and confusion arising out of the unbalanced fusion of the past with the present and hazy, almost dark future. All round are fragments. Nothing fits in the whole. It is impossible to form the whole. Bits of pots and pottery, chips from pillars and stones have littered the stage and mind of this world. They know where they have come from but that is all. The path henceforward is lost. The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men are truthful. They do not claim to show any path. They do not try to be wise and discerning. They admit the confusion in their minds. That is how they become truly artistic.

These writers are the symbolic representatives of the existing state of confusion in the world. Social maladjustment, economic disparity, various false facets of freedom of action and speech, disharmony between body and spirit and between science and religion are the big question marks.

But everywhere in Europe, America or the Soviet Union, the contradictions and doubts have come to the fore after spectacular scientific achievements. In India and many countries of the East, however, this question is academic.

I sit in front of the Hotel Maimana and look at the mountains in the distance. There is a hill in the centre of the town where a cinema building is only now being built. Minimum time taken to reach Maimana from Kabul is eight days. There is a high school but no bookshop stocking modern books on science, art and fiction. There is peace all round; right up to the mountains in the distance. Only the immediate problems of livelihood and living have any meaning.

I wonder if really a conflict between science and religion faces us as a problem. We are still gathering pebbles at this shore of the immense ocean of scientific knowledge. The questions which are now being explored by the Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men will only face us decades later.

Veena brings me her drawings.

"Aren't they good papa?"

"Well! I shall see them first before agreeing with you."

"How peaceful it is here, papa?"

"Do you like peace?"

"I do."

Then she adds after a moment's silence:

"But I shan't like to live here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Still I like to be here on holiday."

"I know what you mean!"

"Eh, you do. Then why do you ask me questions?"

"I won't."

" "

The Governor of Maimana, Mr. Adalat, resides next to the Hotel. He was out last night and has returned just now. He comes straight to see me. I have messages for him from some of his friends in Kabul. Energetic, quick-witted and sharp, he is as well friendly and warm. He loads me with a hundred enquiries. Was I comfortable ? Did they look after me ? How was the food ? Did I get a hot bath ? How was the young girl ? Does she like Maimana ? Yes, we do like Maimana, we both say. Mr. Adalat loves Maimana though his home is in Kabul. It is strange the way we develop our local loyalties.

We have hardly finished the preliminaries when Pyare Lal and Swamy come with a tube in their hand:

"We have bad luck."

"Why ?"

"It appears that a small nail had penetrated the tyre sometime last night and it ate up the entire tube," says Swamy.

"Oh ! I see" I look at the Governor.

We inspect the tube. It is of no use any more. There is no shop selling tubes. What are we to do ? We must have a spare wheel with us though. The Governor is kind. He takes us in his car and borrows us a tube from one of the truck drivers. I promise to send him a new tube in return from Kabul.

We then go and visit a stable. Mr. Abdul Haq rears Buz Kashi horses.

Buz Kashi or goat-snatching is the national game of Afghanistan. Undoubtedly it is one of the most breathtaking sports on earth. It is also a true index of the bravery, toughness, courage and skill of the people of Afghanistan. The game consists of snatching the carcass of a calf from a shallow pit marked around with a circle, carrying it across a huge course and around a given number of points on this course and returning to throw it back in the same pit within the original circle.

It can be played by two or three teams with members of each team varying from six to fifteen. The teams, mounted on horses, gather round the circle and on a signal, they all charge to pick up the carcass. Once a rider has got hold of it he is to carry it away protected by the other members of his team. The opponents then try to snatch it and all along the course tough battles take place. The team whose member is successful in flinging the carcass back into the pit is the winning team. The horses are specially trained for this game as they have to co-operate with the horseman by bending their fore-legs with skill to enable the player to pick up the carcass.

Kataghan with its provincial capital at Faizabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Maimana produce a Buz Kashi team each. On the occasion of the birthday of the king, Zahir Ali Shah, on October fifteenth of each year, they compete in Kabul. The entire diplomatic community, all the other foreigners and thousands of Afghans watch this game.

An ordinary horse in Afghanistan costs between three and five hundred rupees. But the Buz Kashi horse is not less than five thousand. Abdul Haq knows everything worth knowing about the horses. Could not be in the trade otherwise. He asks me to have a ride on the best one he has got. I politely decline. I am no rider.

Mr. Adalat then takes me to the local high school. Thereafter to a small horticulture farm which he is setting up. He shows me the new cinema-house under construction. There is a small museum which is housed in a part of the hotel. Fragments of history are strewn all over Afghanistan.

Lunch is provided by Mr. Adalat. He is so hospitable. He himself comes and joins us. This is the best lunch I have had since I left Kunduz. Rice *pulao*, vegetables and curd. There is no smelly margarine. The bread is crisp and tasty. Veena is happy. She enjoys good food. When we are alone, she says :

“Let us stay here another day.”

"Why?"

"I like the food."

"But then—there is nothing to see here anymore."

"Yes, true. Let's go then."

Her urge to travel and see is stronger than her weakness for food.

Before I retire for an afternoon siesta, I go to where Pyare Lal and Swamy are staying. There is some more work to do on the station wagon, says Swamy.

"What?" asks Pyare Lal.

"I want to open and clean the carburettor."

"Well!"

"It will take me some time!"

"I see!"

After a while Pyare Lal speaks up :

"Nevertheless we can leave tomorrow morning. We have already seen everything that is worth seeing. In fact there is nothing worth seeing."

"What is the hurry?" answers Swamy, "Driving and maintaining the car is a job. Snoring day and night is different."

"Then what, do you never want to return to Kabul? We don't want to get stranded for months."

"Well, well," I cut them short, "let's not go into it all. I think Swamy, we will leave tomorrow morning after all. I will help you clean the carburettor and also help you in any other thing which is still to be done."

Swamy grins :

"I also like leaving tomorrow but I don't know why Pyare Lal Babu is frightened. His words are so depressing. He thinks something is going to happen to him on this journey."

"No Colonel *sahib*; it is Swamy who is always thinking and talking of death. He is..."

"There you are again," I say, "you take it from me that nothing is going to happen to us. Not on this journey."

The Governor arranges a little gathering for me at the house of a local Afghan, a reputed musician. There are about twelve of us in all. Five singers, rest of us the listeners. The musical instruments in Afghanistan are few and simple. A rebeck, a simple violin also called *rabab*, two types of drums, a harmonium and that is about all. But good music is not dependent on the number of instruments or their preciousness. The Afghans have rich and deep musical voices. They sing in high notes with marked pathos. The music is not doleful as that of the Arabs and yet there is an under-current of, what may be called, melancholy. Afghan music in essence is Indian. It is based on Indian *Ragas*, the basic notes. We, Indians also love music. But most of us do so without understanding it. Perhaps that is so everywhere.

One of the items tonight is a solo on *rabab* by a bearded Afghan. What is there in his voice? I am stirred. Being a Sikh by religion I have some associations with this instrument. Our first Guru, Nanak Dev, had two constant companions, Bala and Mardana. Both Mohammedans by faith. Mardana was the *rabab* player. With Bala and Mardana, Guru Nanak roamed all over India and abroad. The *rabab* of Mardana and the songs of Guru Nanak charmed the souls of Indians and foreigners alike. Whether it was power-drunk Emperor Babur or intellectual giant Gorakh Nath, Guru Nanak disarmed and converted both with a song sung to the tune of Mardana's *rabab*. The *rabab* has almost disappeared from the Punjab. But it is popular in Afghanistan. The bearded Afghan sings a song as if it were in a Sikh temple in the Punjab.

Till half past eleven the musical symposium goes on. We then return to the hotel. But Mr. Adalat and I do not want to part. Something has stirred within both of us. Some inexplicable bond. He suggests a game of bridge. I am not good at it. Yet I agree. He calls in a friend and I wake up Pyare Lal. Till two in the morning we continue to play. Now Pyare Lal is almost asleep. We break up the session.

Mr. Adalat leaves and yet he does not want to. I am also reluctant to let him go. That is how sometimes brief meetings bind two most alien persons together. Once it had happened to me in Allepo. I had gone to Hotel Europa to meet someone. He was not there. The reception girl started talking to me. We were together for hardly ten minutes but an age had passed in those minutes. Have I forgotten her till today ? Once it had happened in a train journey from Paris to Toulon back in 1946. The War was just over. I was holidaying in Europe. She was a woman twice my age. Once it was a Sindhi gentleman running a departmental store in Beirut. It all happens imperceptibly, almost suddenly. You seldom discover it till you are about to part. You have to part, yet the mind and soul is unwilling. A portion of your being wants to stay back ; never to leave this person. One never forgets such moments and meetings.

We depart at seven in the morning. Mr. Adalat with his sons and daughters is there to see us off.

XI

THE BEGINNING OF AN ADVENTURE

A few miles outside Maimana we run into the *Koochis*, the nomadic population being thus known in the country. Countless camels and sheep, some goats, a few chicken and one or two horses. Caravan after caravan is on its way to the hilly oases they have frequented for years, for centuries. They are escaping from the hot summers of eastern and southern provinces. The menfolk generally walk, young and old. Some aged women ride the camels while the young ones prefer to walk along with the men. The children run about while the babes are in the laps of mothers. The camels carry their belongings ; the tents, cooking utensils, wheat flour, pulses and some purchases made in Nengerhar, Kabul, Kandhar or Herat for themselves and for the kids.

It is a problem to keep control of the camel caravan when a vehicle passes by. Even one untried and frightened camel can cause untold damage. If he tries to run or quickly get down on the steep side of the road the whole line of camels will follow him; tied as one is to the other with a string. As a vehicle approaches a caravan, everyone gets busy and is most alert. There is hurrying and scurrying and much shouting. What a driver should do is to stop the car till the caravan passes by. But there are very few drivers who do this favour. I am proud to be one of them. I think that caravans have the right of passage here. Nor the delay of a couple of minutes, even of half an hour, matters much on these roads.

The caravans pass by and I watch them wistfully. The tiny bells around the necks of the camels jingle. They speak the history of thousands of years. They remind me of the vanished ages, which in a strange way have yet not entirely vanished. These relics of the past must disappear in the developing countries. They have disappeared in many. They will disappear from the remaining.

The caravans pass by and I continue on the journey.

Fifteen kilometers away from Maimana I find the needle indicating temperature swinging sharply to the right. The engine is getting overheated. I cannot guess the reason. There is no climb. But I must stop to see what is the matter. I stop by the side of a stream. Nearby there is a *Chq-i-Khana*. We get down and look around. Even without opening the bonnet, we know. Swamy cries aloud :

“Oh God ! Oh God !”

The actual Hindi words he uses are, “*bap re bap*”. Translated literally they would mean, “Oh father, my father.” It is not so much the words but his Hindi accent, his facial expression and a broad grin which heightens the excitement.

There is a leak in the radiator. The water drips. The grey station wagon is dust laden. The letters on the number plate can hardly be distinguished. It has served me well, this wagon. I am attached to it as perhaps to a living being ? Has it life ? No. Yet it lives. Is human body a machine ? Yes, in many respects. When man discovered machine we quickly compared ourselves to a machine. But the comparison does not go far. It snaps when the argument veers round to soul and death. Pyare Lal is not a driver nor does he understand much about a car. But he does know that the radiator leak is a serious matter. His face immediately droops and he asks Swamy in a whisper :

“What will happen now ?”

But Swamy is uncharitable. He speaks aloud so as to make no mistake that I hear it :

"What will happen now *Babuji* ? We will spend the day and the night here."

Veena claps and cries :

"Oh, what fun !"

But fun apart a radiator leak is a serious matter and I feel I am in for trouble. The water drips and I stand and gaze. Swamy goes under the car, examines it thoroughly and gives his verdict :

"It sure is a radiator leak."

"I sure can see it, you fool," I want to say but I do not.

It sure is a radiator leak. The problem is not its discovery but what to do about it. A flying stone has damaged the radiator and there is nothing that one can do about it except to open the whole outfit and get it welded. Pyare Lal and Swamy both look at me.

"So what is the answer," I ask them.

Both keep quiet. I repeat :

"What is to be done, my friends ?"

"*Babu* Pyare Lal ! please say what should be done," asks Swamy and laughs.

"This is no matter for laughing Swamy."

I see that they are not fully made up since their yesterday's quarrel. I now address Swamy :

"Backwards or forward ?"

"As you please *sahib* !"

"But what do you think ?"

"I think as you think."

In the meantime the owner of the *Cha-i-Khana* along with a few others who happened to be present there, has joined us. He is short and stocky and wears a small turban. His two front teeth are missing. His lips protrude. A funny but determined face. He has seen many a broken down vehicle in his lifetime and he does not think that a radiator leak is a serious matter at all. What to do, I ask him and he does not mince his words. He is definite and emphatic :

"Go on, *Insha Allah*."

It means that I should trust in God and need not worry. *Insha Allah* is one of the most widely spoken words in Afghanistan. God willing, everything will end up well. I travel on these roads and find that one cannot but invoke the mercy of God. So much really depends upon luck.

Still I want to be a little careful. I need God's mercy but what about water in the radiator? The engine will burst without it, God's mercy or no. But our friend is ready with a reasonable solution :

"There is water throughout. Streams are running full by God's grace. You will have no difficulty."

I can hardly believe this. The last four hundred kilometers could not be more dry. True, the large scale map issued by the United Nations, which guides me, shows numerous streams but I cannot be certain that I will have it every couple of kilometers. As I hesitate, the proprietor of the *Gha-i-Khana* goads me :

"What are you frightened for? The trucks have passed this way with worse defects. You seem to have no faith in God. Why? What is the matter?"

I was not prepared for such a rebuke. Pyare Lal is sceptic and says:

"Let us go back to Maimana and get it repaired"

I agree with Pyare Lal and think that this is the sound course. Why; the only reasonable course. But I wish I could adopt the sound and reasonable course. I would if it does not involve any turning back. In this case it unfortunately does and I am reluctant. It may be foolhardy but there it is. The leak is small, I argue and water everywhere. It will be no problem. At Bala Murghab we will get it repaired. Bala Murghab is, however, one hundred and sixty kilometers farther ahead.

Seeing that I am still undecided the innkeeper is restless and hisses through his broken teeth:

"Believe in God's grace; O traveller and no harm will

come to thee. If thou hast any doubt, I will accompany thee."

I decide and say:

"I think we will go on."

Swamy accepts it cheerfully. Pyare Lal inwardly bleeds.

We carry with us two jerricans full of gasoline and two five litres empty mobiloil tins for water. We fill the radiator, carry spare water and start. *Insha Allah* ! I utter; involuntarily.

Every fifteen kilometers or so we stop the car. We get down. I open the bonnet and the radiator cap. Swamy pours the first tin of water. Pyare Lal takes the empty tin from him and runs to refill it. In the meantime Swamy pours the second tin. The radiator filled and with spare water we go forward till at a suitable place we stop again. After a few awkward runs to and fro the three of us have perfected the system. It is now carried out like a well planned and rehearsed operation. The only one who is enjoying the spectacle is Veena. She sits and cracks a joke at each one of us. Sometimes she tells me not to burn my hand while opening the radiator cap. At others she tells Swamy to go slow as he is spilling a lot of precious water. At times Pyare Lal is told to hurry up. Thus it goes on till we reach a roadside village of Qaisar.

There are a number of trucks and miscellaneous vehicles parked here. We tell them our tale of misery. They all laugh and say that nothing can be done. Carry on, *Insha Allah*, each one of them exhorts us; carry on till Herat.

"Herat ?" It seems incredible to me.

"Yes, of course !"

This is the first time I have heard the name of Herat. So far I was under the impression that Bala Murghab will see us through.

"What about Bala Murghab ?"

"Well ! no !! I don't think so," doubtfully says one Afghan.

But another one adds:

"May be, may be, you can get it done. Please proceed *Insha Allah*."

We proceed.

Today everything else is subordinated to this drill. Am I thinking? Well, yes. To a certain extent. Am I watching the scenery? Barely. There is only one dominant idea and one dominant wish that would to God we do not run short of water on the way. And that is what precisely happens.

This bit is particularly awkward. There is a gradual climb. Rather unexpected. We were therefore not prepared for it. We carry on and no water is visible. There is a stream by the side of the road but it is dry. The engine is getting hot. I drive on. Yet no sight of any pool of water in the stream. The day is also getting warmer. Finally I stop. The engine refuses to pull. For the first time Veena is unhappy and angry :

"You should have foreseen this, papa?"

"How could I?"

"Couldn't you see the hills coming?"

"Didn't know that the stream will run dry."

"It would. Don't you see there is a slope? Water can't rest on a slope for you."

"I see it now."

"You should have seen it before."

"I agree!"

She cools down. But the engine does not.

Nothing that one can do but go in search of water. The radiator can contain about fifteen litres. Two five litres tins are not much good now. I make a fateful decision of draining the gasoline from the jerrican. After pouring about seven litres in the tank the remaining thirteen are spilled. I wonder if I shall reach Qaleh-Nau with the remaining quantity. Qaleh-Nau is another one hundred and sixteen kilometers from Bala Murghab and that is where gasoline is available. Bala Murghab has no gasoline pump. Whatever may happen, it is

wiser to get stranded for gasoline than for water. Some passing vehicle may have spare gasoline but they are unlikely to carry fifteen litres of spare water.

Pyare Lal stays back with Veena and Swamy and I start with the three empty tins. About a kilometer away we come across a puddle of water. The stream is still dry. The place has obviously been used for a night stop by the caravans we had met earlier this morning. The water is reddish yellow. It is certainly a mixed substance. It contains millions of various types of larvae. I shudder to approach it. But what can one do? We fill the tins and return.

"Thank God we didn't have this radiator leak between Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif or between Mazar-i-Sharif and Andkhui," says Veena.

All of us are thankful to God for this favour.

We reach Bala Murghab at three in the afternoon. No one can repair the radiator at this place. We have to go to Herat. It is bad luck, the people say, but it does not matter. Everyone wants to be of use to us but they cannot help. They gather round our wagon and sympathise. Each one of them asks us not to worry. *Insha Allah*, we shall reach Herat.

The hotel in Bala Murghab is full. The Governor of Herat is expected here later in the evening. But they manage a room for us. I go to bed and sleep.

A messenger from the Governor wakes me up at six. Veena and myself get up, have a quick bath and get dressed. The Governor has heard of our adventurous trip. Smilingly he greets us and says:

"My drivers have carried out temporary repairs with cement, soap and raisins and they hope that you will reach Herat alright."

I thank him. We get chatting. He has apparently finished his work and wants to relax. We cannot find a fourth for the bridge and *kot piece* or whist, is the game

which is known all round. It is a crude form of bridge and my mind is transported to the days in the school. It was then that I used to play *kot piece*. It seems ages have passed since then.

The food is served at eight. The main hall of the hotel can accommodate two dozen people and about the same number squat on the floor along the four walls. The Governor sits in the centre reclining against the front wall and I am on his right. The local senior official is on his left and Pyare Lal further on. Veena is on my right. There is so much to eat. Rice *pulao* and *chhalao*, chicken and sheep's meat, vegetables and curds; but what Veena and I relish most is the fresh fish. We have not eaten it since we left Kabul. The food is a plenty, an outstanding feature of Afghan hospitality. If there are three guests they cook at least for six and so the proportion goes on.

We talk of the past. That is what they generally do in these parts. The bridge over the river Bala Murghab, flowing opposite the hotel, is a thousand years old. Once this town was famous for its carpets. The industry then gradually shifted to Daulatabad and Herat. There is a shift again and many weavers are going to Kabul. In the olden days Bala Murghab and many other places were almost inaccessible. The days are changing. I hope they do at a faster pace.

We go to bed at midnight. I have told Pyare Lal and Swamy that we start at five in the morning. Knowing that the day is going to be long they do not object.

I go to bed though I cannot sleep. Many things, episodes, journeys come to my mind. But the one that repeats itself frequently is the memory of two nights spent in the desert between Aleppo and Der-ez-Zor in Syria in 1946. My battalion, the second Sikh Light Infantry, was then stationed in Der-ez-Zor, three hundred and thirty kilometers from Aleppo. I was travelling in a jeep to Der-ez-Zor. The gasoline tank got damaged through driver's carelessness. He had then gone to the nearest town to get it repaired. He returned after

forty-eight hours. All alone for two days and two nights in the desert is certainly memorable.

Gasoline tank and radiator leak are not far different from each other. But I am in a happier position. I have company. And a small but well-provided mobile kitchen.

XII

OPERATION WATER

THE cement, soap and raisins did not do the trick. Only ten kilometers from Bala Murghab the temperature needle on the panel board shot up to danger point. Obviously the fiddling about with the leak had made it worse. Instead of filling water every fifteen to twenty kilometers we had now to do it every eight to ten kilometers. We had, however, ample water supply. Two jerricans and two mobiloil tins contained in all some sixty litres and that worked out to three changes. The Governor had been kind enough to give me enough gasoline to reach Kaleh-Nau.

Two hundred and eighty kilometers stretch in front. Two hundred and eighty long long kilometers. But I am reconciled to a laborious day and that makes the difference. There is no mad rush like yesterday. There is only a sinking feeling in the mind. *Insha Allah*, we shall make it. We have been assured of adequate water supply en route except in one or two bits. There we should run for life, we have been warned. We shall be careful. My three companions are also reconciled. They, in fact, are ready to brave the ordeal. Swampy and Pyare Lal are friends again. Veena has not had enough sleep and I persuade her to rest a little while. Benevolently she agrees.

I sit back and take refuge in Ghalib. The greatest of the Urdu poets, Ghalib is popular all over our country. But he is more so in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

The first language we used to learn in the Punjab was Urdu. Poetical symposiums were immensely popular when I was young. All of us in the Punjab became fond of Urdu poetry which, to a considerable extent, is the poetry for symposiums. The kings, the maharajas, the *navabs* and the petty landlords all vied with one another in having good poets as their proteges. Poetry was written to please the audience. The most important theme was love. Next came a description of the beauty of the beloved. There was some didactic verse and that is about all. Ghalib, in the nineteenth century, excelled all others in these themes. In addition there is much in his verse to show his wide grasp of human psychology, his knowledge of various arts and literatures, his erudition and his understanding of different schools of thought.

Being fond of poetry and literature in my childhood and youth I naturally was a lover of Ghalib. While at college I was perhaps the only boy in Lahore who knew almost all of *Diwan-e-Ghalib* by heart.

I have forgotten most of it since. But I still remember a lot to hum to myself his *ghazals* for hours together. That is what I do today. It is dull otherwise. Herat is far and I have got used to the scenery. The damaged car has taken away the pep. I hum Ghalib to myself and think. Think of the past and the future. But thinking alone tires me. Ghalib is refreshing. He, as if, smoothenes the bad road.

Veena has had an hour and a half of good sleep and she is hungry. I give her biscuits. But she is bored. All of us are busy with the operation water. She has to play but little part in it. Yesterday she was excited. But the excitement has worn out now. She attempts to engage me in conversation and I shirk it.

At ten o'clock we reach Kaleh-Nau. Normally travellers halt here for the night before making for Herat. But we, even with our broken down vehicle are ambitious. There is a decent hotel here and two nice picnic spots in the

vicinity. One of them, Qadis, is particularly good. But as it is we are in no mood for picnics. Herat calls us.

At midday we stop in a wayside village. We are all hungry and are looking out for a decent shop. The person we talk to is a local Afghan official. Tall and rather thinly built, he talks fast and much. Instead of finding a shop for us he leads us to his small quarter which also serves as his office.

"Why don't you come to me. I am a poor man but I shall make you comfortable. There is not much to eat, nevertheless we shall manage. I wish my family were here. There would have not been the slightest difficulty. You see..."

"But, you must understand that we are four of us and..."

"Oh, I see that. I also see that you are Indians. Indians are our friends. You see I have seen a lot of you. I was educated in Kabul. My father..."

"But my friend, this is not fair. I cannot..."

"My house is your house. I am poor but I am an Afghan. After all you are guests here. You are hungry I see and there is no good place to eat. In Kabul, I used to see a lot of movics. They are all Indian of course. Most people like Nargis. But my choice is Madhu Bala. I have good reasons too. I..."

"But you...?"

The words are in my mouth when he almost forcibly ushers us into his room. He is thin but he is strong. He can push me round even if I resist. There is one small table, one rickety chair, one bedstead but plenty of space to squat on the floor. That is what we do. He then forces us to have a wash at the running stream outside his quarter. Even before I go out he has started talking to Veena. I hear him saying:

"You like Kabul, don't you, my daughter. Have you been to Phagman. What about Istalif? Don't you think

that it is the most wonderful place on earth. When I was in college..."

I leave him there. I have a wash. I attend to the car and have a general check up; which Swamy dislikes. He seems to think that my brief check-up is most superfluous. He is the driver and a mechanic of sorts. It is his responsibility to maintain the wagon. He slogs and works at it for hours while I give it a look in a few minutes. He always has a crack at me when I act this way, which is often.

"Is it alright?"

I smile and answer:

"Yes, I suppose so."

One day he deliberately changed the firing order. The vehicle would not start. When I asked him to get down and have a look at the engine he said:

"But you had a check up Colonel *sahib*."

Today he also has a crack:

"I hope everything is alright."

I smile and do not answer.

When I get back our host and Veena are absorbed in conversation. Veena was also pent up, I am sure. I let them entertain each other and lie down for a few minutes.

The food has been produced from nowhere. There is curd, meat and *nan*, the Afghan bread. In such wilderness what more does one expect. I think this Afghan is a wizard. In the matter of producing food for stray guests most of them are wizards.

We have our food and I feel embarrassed. What right have I to be his guest, to be entertained by him? I cannot offer him anything in return. A mere expression of thanks does not seem to be enough. It is embarrassing and even awkward and yet there is no solution. One cannot just refuse Afghan hospitality.

After food I request for boiling water. I want to drink coffee. I must have it after food, otherwise I feel thirsty. I have with me Nescafe and powdered milk. I make the

coffee. My host watches me intently. He is intrigued. He is never seemed to have seen such an instant preparation of any beverage. Could I offer him some? He emphatically refuses. But then I argue that if he can force kindnesses on me why cannot I leave a tin of powdered Klim milk for his kids?

We part—never to meet again.

At about two in the afternoon we reach Sazak or Sabzak Pass. It is two thousand three hundred meters high. Sazak or Sabzak indicates vegetation and greenery. It undoubtedly is green all round. It is heartening to see so much greenery. In the preceding thirteen hundred kilometers one has been thirsting for such a sight. Sabzak Pass is well-worth seeing for otherwise one may go away from Afghanistan thinking that there are hardly any trees in this country.

I cool down the engine well before starting on the climb. I have been told that it is steep and tricky. The road turns into a track and the ruts caused by big trucks act as brakes. One has therefore to be careful. Once one stops it may take hours to reach the top. The car will pick up speed with extreme difficulty. I am taking no risks. I engage the four-wheeled-drive and start the climb, *Insha Allah* on my lips. For if we get stuck anywhere sixty litres of water will just finish in getting out of a deep rut. We will all have to come back to the valley for more water. Veena shall not be able to make it nor will it be advisable to let her stay alone with the wagon.

Insha Allah, we start and *Insha Allah* we reach the top. All the time it was just touch and go. Even the four-wheeled-drive seemed to let down once or twice. God is certainly with us.

The slope on the other side is gradual. I switch off the engine and let the wagon slide. Nearly fifteen kilometers of gliding down. This is the longest stretch we have done today without filling water in the radiator.

At Armalik the ignition coil refused to work. Is this

the last straw? No, God is with us. It took us only one hour to change the spare one Swamy carried and we are on the way to Herat again.

"Shall we ever reach Herat?" says Swamy.

I agree that it has been a long day. We have already been on the road for twelve hours and another three hours journey is the minimum, I reckon. I feel I am riding rough shod. It is not fair. I should have stopped at Kaleh-Nau as most of the other travellers do. I say apologetically :

"I hope so Swamy."

Now Pyare Lal has his chance to have a dig at Swamy :

"Why, are you exhausted? You thought you were tough."

"No, I didn't mean that. I am just wondering if we are on the right road."

"Yes, papa, you might check up. We may be on the wrong road."

"What makes you think so?"

"You see it is no longer a road at all. It is getting worse meter by meter."

The state of the road dawns upon me as a revelation. I had not thought of it at all. At Armalik I did see another route but there was no doubt that it was merely a sidetrack. No one could take it otherwise. How has Swamy brought up this point, I wonder?

"Swamy, how did you think of such a thing?"

He laughed heartily.

"I only meant it as joke. I am sorry if you have taken it seriously."

But Veena has a premonition :

"If I were you, papa, I would check up."

Check up but from whom? There is not a soul anywhere. A couple of kilometers further we see a shepherd returning home with his flock. We stop. He takes ten minutes to reach us.

"Is this the road to Herat?"

"Of course," the young fellow says.

I look at Veena, engage the gear and am about to start off when Veena asks :

"Isn't there a better route to Herat?"

"Of course there is."

"Is this that one?"

"No"

Veena looks at me. I am puzzled.

"Where is that one then?"

"You have left it at Armalik."

"What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I have said."

"You mean we are on the wrong route?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then?"

"Then what?"

"Look, sir, we want to go to Herat and we want to go there by the best route available."

"Then sir, you go back to Armalik and take the other route."

"But that seemed to be worse."

"Yes, the one that seems worse is better later and what seems better is worse later. As you see it for yourself."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. By this route you will not reach Herat till the morning."

"Oh God."

We argue among ourselves and decide to return to Armalik.

We reach Herat at ten at night. Seventeen hours of driving. Seventeen hours of mental strain and physical exertion. Even then it is thanks to Veena. She with her intuition has done better than all the three of us.

XIII

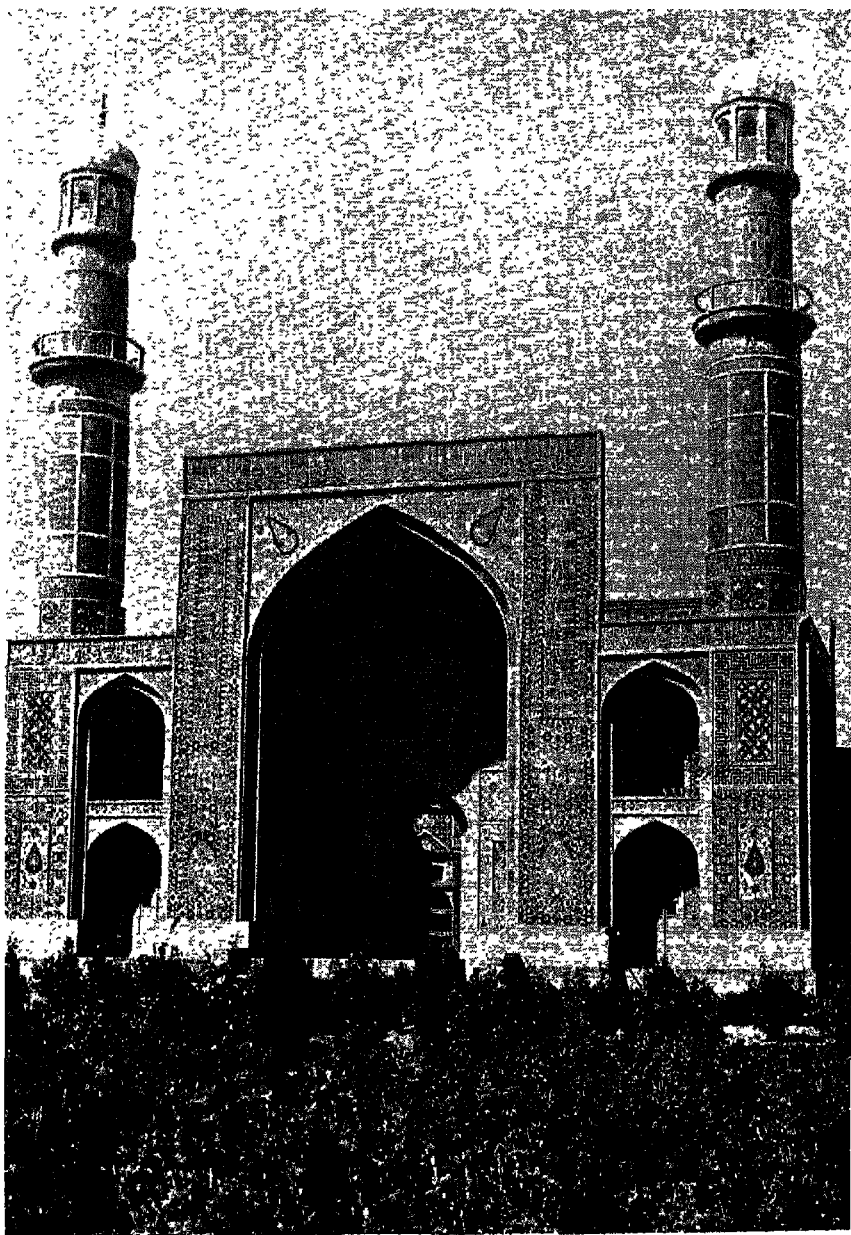
HERAT

I like Herat. The atmosphere here is relaxing; and relaxation is what I need most. It has been tough these past two days. Herat has the best furnished hotel in Afghanistan. Wall to wall Daulatabadi Maur carpets. I get a luxurious feeling. There is a radio provided. The sofa sets have brocade coverings. The reclining chairs are comfortable. The rooms are cosy. Two of the suites have attached bath-rooms. The garden is spacious with thick grassy lawns.

Most of the town is modern. The olden parts are quickly disappearing. The drive from the hotel to the town is beautiful. Small cypress trees grow in the middle as well as on both the sides. Wide roads and modern houses. Bazars are full. The Russian and the Iranian borders are a little over hundred kilometers each. A variety of goods come in.

The names of Kabul, Kandhar and Herat ring old memories in my mind. These names occurred and reoccurred in school and college curriculums in the Punjab. Herat with its hoary past intrigues me. After Balkh dwindled in importance Herat became the main centre of intercourse between East and West. Traders from China and various parts of Central Asia met here before proceeding to India, Persia and Europe. Many a nation dominated Herat in turn.

The area around Herat consisting of the valley of Hari Rud is fertile. Pistachio nuts grow wild on the moun-



The Grand Mosque, Herat

tains. I have been here twice before. The members of the hotel staff recognise me. They also know my likes and dislikes. They produce pure butter for me from somewhere. They make simple food without much margarine and chillies. The Governor had sent in a word to expect me that evening and all of them were up.

I see to it that Pyare Lal and Swamy are fixed up properly. They had a hard day. Swamy needs at least two to four tablets of entero-vioform. I then put Veena to bed. She is tired though she does not admit. Her eyes are closing and yet she says that I fuss too much.

We get up late the following morning. The radiator is repaired by lunch time. How simple the defect now seems. In the afternoon I take my companions sight seeing.

The best spot is the Jami Masjid, one of the most beautiful I have seen. It is adorned with magnificent mosaic work and designs in coloured tiles. It was built by famous Shah Rukh (1405-47) and his talented queen Gohar Shad Agha. Her tomb is also a monument worth seeing and lies outside the town. It has a wonderful painted interior. Near this tomb are sky high Mussala minarets. Three kilometers west is the tomb of Abdulla Ansari, a famous man of letters. I had read about him while at the University. He wrote both in Persian and Arabic and also collected about 300,000 sayings of prophet Mohammed. A few other authors also lie buried here. The tomb of Ansari was built in the eighteenth century.

Nearer the hotel we find two men walking along the side road singing aloud. It is a bewitching tune. The song seems to be familiar. Veena is the first one to notice it:

"You know this song, papa?"

"Well, no. But it somehow sounds familiar."

"So do I think. I have heard it somewhere."

As we go past these men I stop the wagon so as to be able to hear better.

"I think I can guess, papa !"

"What is it ?"

"It is mummy's poem."

As I listen carefully I find it is true. Many of Prabhjot's poems have been rendered in verse into Persian by a brilliant savant, Doctor Abdul Ghafoor Rawan Farhadi. He is a remarkable person well versed in five different languages. He is now learning Hindi and Punjabi. A collection of my wife's poems translated by him was published in Kabul last year *Lala* (The Tulip) was the title. It has been widely acclaimed and reviewed in all the newspapers and magazines in Afghanistan. The King himself sent a note of congratulations to Prabhjot. Some of the poems have caught the fancy of the people of this land. They are sung in the streets like folk songs. But this evening's encounter is most unexpected, as well as the choice of the poem. It is unlike a folk song. Here is the English rendering of a few stanzas:

Neither you
Nor I
Nor anyone else knows
What your eyes have said to mine.

As a flash of lightning
Rends the veil of heaven
So longing bursts the bond of discretion
And I fled to your arms.

You sounded the depth of my heart
Undid the knot of passion
You shed the tears on my eyelashes
And pressed your lips on mine.
In your hands you held my hands
In the hush of the dark night
You heard the clamour of desire
And with soothing fingers silenced it.

In fact these two men turned out to be poets themselves.

There was a meeting of a literary society in the hotel that evening and they were going to attend it. I was eager to make contact with some of them.

Afghanistan is rich in literature. Some of the greatest books in the Persian language have been written on the soil of Afghanistan. Among them are the Shah Nama of Firdousi and the Masnavi. The former was started in Balkh and afterwards completed in Ghazni in the time of Sultan Mahmud. Ghazni and the latter is the renowned work of Maulana Balkhi, who was born in Balkh. Persian till today continues to be the important court language of Afghanistan.

The outstanding modern Persian writer is Khalil Ullah Khan Khalali. He is primarily a poet and his verse has won acclaim in Persia and in Tajekistan, a Republic of USSR, where the language in use is also Persian. Many of his poems have been rendered into Punjabi by Prabhjot Kaur. Below are a few excerpts from some of his poems:

"The fire of an inward pain
Has smothered my being,
O, God, let it be
I have been put to enough tests."

"My bodily form, after all
Is not cast in iron,
Nor are modelled in stone,
My living limbs."

"Oh, Yes, Creator willed it well,
That I be a peerless pearl,
But this ignorant world
Has wasted me without a word."

"No, I no longer believe in Thee
Take back this life
I am tired,
Tired of this world of Thine."

"O God, give me the fire
 to burn my body and soul
 And burn the ever
 afflicting problem of profit and loss
 Give me that one flame, the
 very nearness of which
 Should burn myself and
 this and the world next."

Dr. Rawan Farhadi, Abraham Safa, Qarizada and Yobal are other outstanding Persian poets and writers.

Though Persian continues to be the official as well as the popular language of Afghanistan Pashtu is being increasingly encouraged. The time will soon come when both Persian and Pashtu will be the official languages.

Pashtu can boast of having a fairly close relationship with the Indo-European group of languages. Some philologists consider that it provides a link with the ancient language of the Aryans. From some of the historical Aryan words like Arya, Aryana-Warsha, Aryana-Vija the roots of which can also be traced in Pashtu it appears that this language does have some close connections with the original Aryan language which, according to Gustave Le Bon, was called Ariac, and that like Sanskrit and Zend, Pashtu also to some extent owes its derivation to this ancient language. Doctors Trump and Darmesteter are also of the same opinion and conform this relationship by comparing it with Sanskrit and the language of the Avesta.

The oldest book discovered in this language, however, dates back to only 1729. This was written by Putah Khazanah in Kandhar and is said to contain some Pashtu poems written as early as the fifteenth century.

The greatest of the Pashtu poets is Khushal Khan Khattak who is also a national hero of Afghanistan. Besides being a poet Khushal Khan was as well a man of the sword and spent a greater part of his life fighting against the Moghul

Emperor Aurangzeb for the independence of the Pashtuns.
Sings Khattak:

“Majesty belongs to Justice
For Justice alone has the power to command;
I will never submit to a tyrant.
The Mosque is the House of God;
I will never pray in it to any other master.

If the Prophet could raise his head
From under the earth where he is buried,
I wonder whether he would recognize
The followers who do not follow him.

I will prefer to pray in a Moghul prison,
Rather than in a Moghul mosque,
For the glories of the past and of our ancestors
Which, alas, their sons have lost.”

His poetry covers a wide range of subjects including love and philosophy. He even entered the field of orthography reform and introduced several innovations. His works include *Kuliyat*, *Tarikh-i-Pashtu*, *Baznama*, *Dastur Nama*, *Hadya* and *Ainaya*.

Rehman Baba was another famous Pashtu poet who lived in the seventeenth century. His poetry has the same standing with Pashtuns as that of Hafiz with the Persians.

The contemporary outstanding Pashtu writers are Abdul Rauf Benawa, Mohammed Gul, Gul Patcha Ulfat and Syed Shamsuddin Majrooh. My wife and myself had the privilege of collaborating with Benwa in the translation of the works of Rabindra Nath Tagore and some other Indian writers.

About eighty kilometers from Herat is a place called Obek. It is famous for its hot water springs. I knew it will not be worth a visit but I have nothing to do on the next day. Pyare Lal and Swamy badly need rest. Veena and myself get along to Obek.

They have constructed a couple of baths here. We spend

quite some time enjoying the contact of warm sulphuric smelling water. They say it is healthy. I have not much faith in such healing aids but since I have come I thought I might have a dip and then Veena forced me to stay on. After lunch in the hotel, specially built there, we start back. Veena goes on chattering and asking questions. I continue taking pleasure in answering her as best as I can. I wonder if Veena will remember this trip at all when she grows up. In any case she is bound to forget these side visits and our continuous conversation. But shall I forget it ?

Near Chashme-i-Obeh is the grave of Khwaja Qutub-ud-Din Maudud, the grandfather of Khwaja Muhi-ud-Din Chishti, known to us in India the Khwaja Sahib Chishti of Ajmer.

Before I left Kabul I also intended to visit Jaam village about two hundred kilometers from Obeh on the diagonal road running between Herat and Kabul. But I find it impossible now. The station wagon is unable to bear this arduous journey. I hope I reach home without any further mishap.

Near Jaam village they have discovered a high minaret lying on the bank of Hari Rud. It is seventy meters high and bears a striking resemblance to the Qutab Minar of Delhi. The very fact that it has only been discovered some time ago shows how inaccessible it is. No living soul has passed by it for decades.

They say, it is built on a pentagonal base and is three storeys high. The first two storeys are cylindrical in shape and separated by balconies from the third one. The third storey is topped by a steeple-like structure obviously meant for announcing the prayer calls. The entire monument is constructed in baked bricks and is connected to its different parts by a winding staircase. The outer walls are decorated with Kofī inscriptions and floral patterns, representing the Ghori style of decoration. Apparently it was erected as a monument of victory by Sultan Ghias-ud-Din Ghori about eight centuries ago. Some authorities have suggested that the

similarity between this minaret and that of the Qutab Minar of Delhi reveals the latter to be a copy of former but further research is needed to prove this theory. It is possible that Qutab-ud-Din Aibak might have been inspired by the Jaam monument but some of the people who have seen it point out that in perfection of style and in exterior decoration and finish it is in no way comparable to the Qutab Minar of Delhi. The short interval between the death of Ghias-ud-Din and the rise of Qutab-ud-Din also lends credence to the fact that Qutab Minar could not have been a copy of something which existed before.

Wandering leisurely through the villages on the roadside we reach Herat for the evening tea.

XIV

THE YEARS PAST

OVER two thousand years ago Alexander the Great on his way to Kabul and thence to India, had travelled on this road from Herat to Kandhar. Since then a great number of conquerors and adventurers and many an ordinary folk like me have traversed it. Almost the entire stretch from Herat to Kandhar is barren. It can be extremely uncomfortable in summer months. Already on the ninth of May it is hot. The wind burns as if blowing through an oven. There can be water problem even. On the other hand the winter months are no less uncomfortable. It is cold and dreary. There is little protection from piercing cold winds.

What is there in man which braves these difficulties? What was it that urged Greek, Central Asians, Indians, Chinese and Persians to be away from their homes on journeys which would take years to complete? Was it the lure of distant lands? The glory of conquest? The hunger for food or an ever afresh restlessness of human soul? The restlessness continues even today. It may have taken different shapes with the passage of time but the spirit of man certainly is not at peace.

Humanity has reached a high level in the development of science and culture. Never before mankind had at its disposal means of such comfortable and enjoyable living. Yet it appears that somewhere we have lost the way; that somewhere we have erred in relating our scientific advancement to the eternal restlessness in our soul. It is true that

we have no heart to watch the gladiators doing each other to death in front of our eyes but then how can one reasonably answer for the brutalities committed in the past two Great Wars or for an example at the time of the partition of the Indian sub-continent.

That brings me to "The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men" which I have not still finished. Do not they want an answer to this very question ?

We are now at the threshold of the greatest era of scientific achievement. We have had space shots and soon we shall be exploring the Moon and the Mars and perhaps the distant planets also. Shall the era of such achievements remain petty and prosaic in so far as our adjustments and relations between individuals and nations are concerned ? That is the question.

Such arguments and counter arguments come to my mind as I drive the wagon on my way to Kandhar. That is how the human mind works. A mass of seemingly unrelated data and thoughts flit through at an amazing speed. I am glad I have a set of perfectly charming companions. These thoughts may otherwise overpower me.

"Is it a long journey ahead of us today ?" asks Veena.

"Yes. Over three hundred kilometers."

"It is the longest bit we are going to do. Isn't it?"

"It is."

"But will there be nothing to see today !"

"Well, nothing very much, I'm afraid. Near Farah there are a few relics though. But I don't think we shall have this diversion."

"Won't it be dull ?"

"Seems so. But you never know. Something may crop up."

"I do hope so, papa. I don't like a dull journey."

"I know, you naughty girl. I hope we don't have a breakdown though like the last one."

She kept quiet for a minute and then said:

"So long as it is interesting I don't mind."

Pyare Lal prays:

"Oh God, please do not land us in another mess."

Swamy cries:

"Oh God ! my God !!"

I smile.

Early in the day we cross Shindand. It is a wide stream though partly dry. There are bits of water here and there. One of these bits is about fifty meters wide and the current seems to be fast. I engage the four-wheeled-drive and enter the river slowly.

Pyare Lal says in an audible whisper:

"It's too early in the day to get stuck up."

Swamy laughs:

"It seems I will need a good dose of medicine today !"

But I am sure it will be all right. The bed of the stream is rocky. Vehicles have already passed at this point and with a four-wheeled-drive we do not need any pushing. I drive carefully. Once in shallow water I look back. Pyare Lal and Swamy are clutching each other's hands. At my searching glance Swamy immediately smiles but Pyare Lal is unable to change his expression.

From here to Farah the countryside reminds me of the day I first entered Afghanistan. It was in my own car via Torkham border. It took us a long time to get out of Peshawar. There was the truck to be loaded and the permits of the servants to be arranged. There was some delay at Jamrud and then at the Pakistan side of the border. When we entered Afghanistan, it was nearly midday and we were hungry.

The Afghan at the check post greeted us and looked at our passports and papers. Everything was in order except that I had no permit from Afghan authorities in India or Pakistan for taking my car with me. I had not known about it.

"You have to go back to Peshawar to the Afghan Counsel," he said.

I hardly knew any Persian then but still I explained in some language that I cannot bring myself to it. He was, however, adamant and Afghans can be really adamant when they want to. In any case we were hungry and I asked his permission to eat first. This handsome Afghan looked at us for quite sometime and then I could see that the traditional spirit of hospitality had lit in his eyes. Irresistibly he asked us to come in. He then took us to a nearby garden, ordered fresh water and fruit for us. We had not yet finished our lunch when he said that we could take our car and that I should just sign a certificate to this effect. That set the tone for me in Afghanistan.

When I travelled further I saw the dry hills on either side. I had never thought that mountains could be so bare. Not even a tree or a bush. So far in India, Middle East and Europe I had never come across such mountains. One expects the deserts to be dry but the mountains, no. Prabhjot also had the same impression. We looked at the mountains and then at each other. She said:

"I could never have believed it, if someone told me."

"I still can't believe it," I answered.

A hundred and twenty kilometers to Nengerhar were spent wondering about this one fact alone. Almost the same distance from there to Kabul told a similar tale.

Today we are confronted with a similar tale again. We are now nearing Farah and are happy that we have kept good time. But the day was not to be without its adventure. The Farah river is a wide one as most of the rain fed rivers are. They swell during the rainy season and are almost dry during remainder of the year. Their beds are generally rocky. Normally there is no danger of the motor tyres getting enmeshed with sand or loose earth. It can, however, be dangerous if you are caught in midstream and there is a flood. The water then gushes forth in torrents and cars and trucks are sunk, as would bigger things if they were to be in the way.

I was once saved from such a near tragedy between Nengerhar and Kabul. Aab-e-Dabli is one of the innumerable streams which cross this road and fall into the Kabul river running besides. There were hardly any bridges on these streams then. Aab-e-Dabli is only two meters wide but these two meters are the most treacherous in the whole of Afghanistan. The bed, though rocky, is completely undependable. Somehow or other the vehicles get stuck. Once stuck it takes at least two hours to push them across. Sometimes half a day or even whole of a day. There is a story that once a number of vehicles and caravans were thus held up here when they were looted by dacoits. Since then a permanent police post has been established there.

I, along with Prabhjot, Veena, Rohini, and Swamy, was on my way from Nengerhar to Kabul. At Aab-e-Dabli about one hundred vehicles were held up. There were camel caravans also. They have to stop if the vehicles stop. It was almost like a small fair. A five ton truck loaded with steel plates was amidst Aab-c-Dabli. It is surprising that such a small stream with hardly any water in it immobilises a five ton powerful International truck. Stones were being thrown below the wheels, people were shouting, pulling and pushing. It had been so for the past four hours. People helped and went away tired. A fresh lot came to help. Many teams had so far been unsuccessful.

I was in hurry that afternoon. At six there was a function in the Indian Embassy and I had to be present. I approached the drivers and a minor official and they agreed to let me be the first after this truck had passed through. They are so generous here to foreigners. I therefore brought my station wagon right to the front.

All of us came out and offered whatever assistance we could. Even Rohini and Veena threw many stones each. At about four our efforts succeeded and the five tonner crossed on the other side. There were shouts of joy from the assembly.

We sat in the wagon and I started it. In the shouts

of joy were lost the shouts of a few people upstream crying, "the water is coming, the water is coming." Some of them realised the danger only when they heard the sound of rolling water, the opposing wind having contributed in precipitating a near-catastrophe.

But by then I had started my wagon and could not hear the sound of the coming flood. I was less than a meter away from the stream when an Afghan rushed in front shouting and many others came running and gesticulating to me to stop. I did stop dead. They then shouted to me to reverse the wagon. I did as soon as I could. But not without the gushing waters touching the front wheels. Our saviour had by then jumped on the bonnet and a few more meters in reverse gear saved all of us from drowning.

The two meters wide stream had swollen to about eight meters. Big boulders by the side of the Kabul river were carried forward by Aab-e-Dabli like pieces of cardboard. Was it luck? Was there the hand of Providence in this? If the five tonner had not been cleared for two minutes more it would have been washed off and dashed into pieces. We escaped death by just a moment.

Today again our station wagon was stuck up in the midst of Farah river. Till about the end of May they have a ferry over here to transport vehicles. But it is not working today. It is under repairs. Everyone, however, says that there is nothing to worry, *Insha Allah!* Trucks and station wagons are crossing through the stream. The current has lost its force.

There is no help except to wade through the river. But the approach is bad. The big trucks have caused deep ruts. Worse than even those between Shibargan and Andkhui. We are held up. It takes us an hour to dig our path. Pyare Lal has swooned and with difficulty I have brought him back to consciousness. The water we carry in the bottles is boiling hot and we bring cooler water for him from the river.

After driving a couple of hundred meters we reach the

water's edge. Swamy is at the wheel. He drives slowly and cautiously but notwithstanding what the people have told us the current is still fast and water level high. The engine goes off. The wagon is standstill.

Veena laughs:

"What will now happen, papa?"

I thank God she is with us. The effects of adversity are lightened. To be frank I was frightened for the sake of Veena and my companions. The encounter at Aab-e-Dabli is fresh in my mind. These streams are really treacherous. Long years as a soldier have played upon my character and feelings in such a way that I never think of death, never see it coming, never care for it. The worst situations find me smiling. I smile as my attitude is simple. Death comes only once and when it comes no one can stop it. But today there are three lives bound to me. No doubt if the flood comes we are all washed off. There will be no time to run to safety.

"We had it, Veena," I force a smile.

Pyare Lal and myself immediately get down and start pushing the wagon. The water is upto our waists. But we two are no use. Luckily a party of three Afghans becomes visible. We shout for them. But they are far and they do not hear. Are they deaf? No, they are not. They hear us eventually and come our way. Anyhow they do walk slowly. Reaching the waters' edge they want to know what we need them for.

"To push the vehicle?"

"Good God!"

I know it is unfair but then what is to be done? They are reluctant with good reasons. Their clean clothes indicate that they are on their way to some function. Finally Veena shouts:

"You must help us. Are you Afghan or not?"

They cannot bear this reproach from a foreigner child. Verily they are Afghans. They come and help us. Five

of us push the vehicle to the dry stretch.

It was a memorable experience. Also memorable is the fact of our drinking water from the river in gulps. It had become so hot and we had put such an effort that I was drenched through and through. Upto waist by being in water, upwards through perspiration. Caring little for the dysentery or diarrhoea I drink the red sandy water to my fill; I must have drunk at least two litres. Happily, nothing happened. No dysentery or diarrhoea. My constitution must be excellent. The wagon rests on dry pebbles. It seems to be looking at me, sorry for having let us down. I say it does not matter. He is not to be blamed. How can one blame a wagon and after all he has been so good to me, to all of us.

In the distance I could see the modern bridge being constructed over Farah river. I watch it wistfully. It will open to traffic three months hence.

I am going to have a lasting memory of this adventure in another shape also. It is the big carpet I had brought in Andkhui. It has got wet and they say that all efforts to iron out the folds from a wet carpet remain unsuccessful.

At Farah there is nothing worth seeing except an imposing pentagonal fortress with high wall and semicircular bastion of mud-bricks outside the town. People say that this was one of the halting stations of Alexander. It can be, though the fort is not built earlier than the Ghaznavid period.

We have a late lunch in the Farah hotel and immediately thereafter start for Dilaram, where we reach at about sunset.

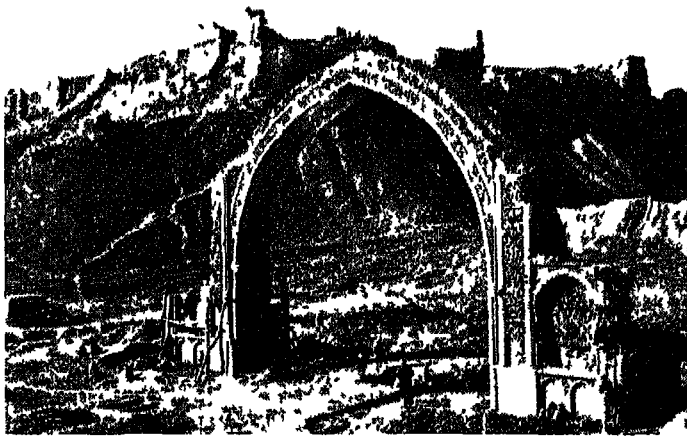
The wagon is fully unloaded. So much water has entered it that quite a few of our belongings are damaged. The carpets are stretched fully on the floor. Pyare Lal's small carpet, bought in Herat, is safe and all of us are happy for that.

Dilaram is no town or village. The only existing building is the hotel situated on the bank of Khash Rud. It

is the site of a modern bridge, recently constructed. All round is a vast featureless desert.

As the Sun sets I come and sit on the steps of the hotel building. Past years stretch before and around me as does the desert. But unlike the desert around me these years are not featureless. At first glance the whole panorama may appear diffused and colourless but soon rise in its midst the memories of outstanding events. Memories of eventful years. One of my novels is named "Thirty-nine Years." It is partly biographical. I had written it when I was twenty-six. I had looked thirteen years hence but certainly it could not be a forecast or a projection of my aspirations. The very fact that it is placed in the period of Rajput ascendancy, belies any connection with the present. Nevertheless this novel comes to my mind.

I sit on the steps and watch the setting sun. This is what I used to do in Shaiba, twenty kilometers from Basra in Iraq. In 1945-46 my battalion was stationed there. The setting sun had a similar glow. The surroundings were similarly bleak and dreary. The memories similarly overpowered me. Brooding over the past in such surrounding always makes me a little sad. I do not know if it is natural. Perhaps it is so if life has been rich and eventful.



Kalao - Bist : Aich of Justice



Buz Kashi : the national sport of Afghanistan

THE HELMAND VALLEY

ON my way to Girishk I kept on thinking of Wahid, the hotel keeper at Dilaram. He was tall and lean. Had a marked squint in his right eye and his unsteady gait indicated that he was lame somewhere in his left leg. He was dark complexioned with a snub nose. It had taken us sometime to get him out of his room on our arrival at the hotel.

He did welcome us though it appeared that he was none too happy. Perhaps he was not well.

"Did't you know that we were coming?" I asked him.

"No, not at all. It is impossible to get the news in time of any 'big' visitor."

"But surely the *hakim*, the sub-governor, must have passed this way two hours ago. We had sent the message through him."

"Oh, I see. Was it about you? I wish I had known. I really did't understand."

"Anyway, you can put us up."

"Oh, sure but you see it is the question of food and water and all that!"

"Why? Is no water available?"

"No, sir, you see it has to come from over two kilometers away."

"Then we shall have the water from the river."

"Oh no, no. You won't have to do that. Wahid knows

how to look after his guest if he wants to. I have in the past entertained Wazir..."

Then he shot off. His dark face got animated and it seemed the self-praise will not stop.

"Wahid ! we will have a longer session of this talk later but what about some tea first."

"Oh yes, I will empty my own pitcher for your sake."

He walked a few meters away but turned back and asked:

"I am sure you have sugar and tea leaves."

When he disappeared Vcena said:

"Have you noticed something, papa."

"About whom ?"

"About Wahid of course. Who else ?"

"Yes, I noticed that he has a squint."

"And ?"

"I think, he is lame !"

"And ?"

"What else ? No, I can't think of anything else."

"Have a shot again. Think hard."

I did, and I could't think anything else than his complexion and his height and girth.

"You give up," said Vcena.

"I think I do."

"Where is your power of observation ? You are so proud of it being an officer."

"No nonsense, please. Speak up."

"He has only one arm."

"No !" I was wonderstruck.

"Make sure when you see him next."

I made sure. Wahid had only one arm. The other one had been amputated at the elbow. But how cleverly did he conceal this fact. Or was it natural ? He stood, walked, lighted the fire, cooked, served at the table, laid the bath in such a manner that the fact of his amputated arm was never

ordinarily disclosed. It appeared as if it was bent double behind his back, as a matter of habit.

Wahid produced wonderful tea. Was it the water of his pitcher that made all the difference ? The sugar and the tea-leaves were ours. What a flavour it had ! Our sugar, tea leaves and powdered milk had not wrought this magic since we had left Kabul.

For dinner Wahid also made excuses to start off.

"You just can't get anything here at less than twenty-four hours' notice. Meat is out of question. Even vegetables and chicken is to come from ten kilometers away."

I knew Wahid by then.

"My dear Wahid, we must eat something. I tell you we had a long day today. The lunch was horrid. The hotel-keeper at Farah..."

"Don't you please mention him before me. He is no cook at all. Well, if that is so, then I will kill my own pet hen and for vegetables I will also do something. You just leave it to me."

We had already left ourselves to him.

The food he produced was excellent. After food I requested him for tea again. I wanted to enjoy his tea as often as I could. One cannot have the dinner too often but tea is different.

When he brought the tea in our room he sat down by our side and said :

"Will you do me a favour ?"

"Of course, whatever little we can do."

"I am sure you can. I want you, sir, and this young daughter to listen to the people I have the honour of serving."

"Why not Wahid. It is so nice of you really."

He then brought out a packet of papers from his pocket and one by one recounted to us the names of the great personages and the years and months in which he cooked for them at Kabul, Kandhar, Ghazni and at Dilaram.

"With your skill at cooking and preparing tea you should be in a royal household."

"Yes, but it is a long story. If you were not tired I would have sat here a little longer."

I really was tired. The hard labour in the river of Farah had been much too much. My whole body was aching. I had no answer, when Veena came to my rescue :

"Do tell me please Wahid. Let papa go to sleep. I have also to ask you a few questions."

This was the best solution. The last I remember is the story Wahid was telling Veena about his amputated arm.

On the way to Girishk, Veena recounted to me what Wahid had told her. But she was not definite. Was the very version given by Wahid confused or was it that the story and some dreams of Veena had intermingled to make it incoherent ?

We were still talking about Wahid when we reached Girishk. It is a small town and the seat of an assistant Governor. I know the Governor. I had met him when I once before passed through Girishk. He is kind, gentle and extremely likeable. I called at him and he arranged for my visit to the Helmand valley. I was given a guide. We reached Lashkar Gah at about lunch time.

Lashkar Gah is a dreamland in the desert. Wide tarmac roads, with footpaths and growing trees on either side. Modern bungalows, all looking new and fresh as if washed. Each house has a lawn with a hedge. Not a dry leaf or a dry blade of grass. The side streets are also tarmac. There are sign posts all over; the roads, streets and houses being named and numbered. The hotel or the club building is a wonder. The entrance is exquisite, the main hall takes one's breath away, the staircase is made of marble, the suites and the bath-room fittings are ultra-modern, the rear view is that of the running Helmand. Veena asks :

"Where are we papa ?"

"I don't know darling !"

Lunch is laid on. Soup, fried fish and white sauce, roast chicken and ice-cream. All this in the midst of a desert. We take a long time eating.

Azim is our new guide and he is to take us around the valley. He is all set but Veena and myself are not. I do not want to admit that I have eaten too much and so I ask Veena :

"You think you will go straightway or would you like to rest and have a change?"

Veena has guessed what I want and says :

"I am tired."

I now have an excuse to tell Azim that we shall start at four. After all it shall not take us more than two hours.

"It may be three," he says hesitantly. It is obvious that he wants it to be four.

"Doesn't matter. The sun doesn't set till six thirty."

"As you please."

I know he is disappointed.

At four we start and first of all we visit Lashkari Bazar. It is about six kilometers from Lashkar Gah. The Imperial place and other magnificent buildings of the Ghaznavides were unearthed here in 1951. Lashkari Bazar and Kalao-Bist, about fifteen kilometers southward, at one time formed a single and undoubtedly a huge city. The former was a centre of trade and commerce and the latter the cantonments and the Government headquarters. It is certain that this city was built under the orders of the famous Sultan Nizamuddin Abul Qasim Yamcen-ud-Dowla Mahmoud (Mahmoud of Ghazni) some nine hundred years ago. The city was enlarged and beautified by his able successor Shahab-ud-Dowla Masoud. During his time greater efforts seem to have been concentrated on Kalao-Bist, where till today we can see the imposing ruins of the palaces, forts, gardens, mosques and public baths. The Palace, Hall of Sultan Mahmoud was decorated with murals of the troops of the Royal Guard. The finest relic

consists of a sixteen meters high arch, known as the Arch of Justice, with numerous geometrical designs worked in coloured tiles.

Lashkari Bazar lies in the heart of Helmand valley and near the confluence of the rivers Arghandhab and Helmand. The Ghaznavide monarchs came here during winter and for nearly six months it was the administrative and military heart of the great Ghaznavide Empire. The Helmund river used to carry boatloads of merchandise and passengers to Sistan. The city fell back into disuse after the disintegration of the Empire, though it was still a flourishing city till the time of King Bahrami Shah. It was Sultan Alaadin Jahansoz of Ghor who razed it completely to the ground. It remained thus forgotten till the excavations by the French Archaeological Mission.

When it was decided to develop this valley no better place than Lashkari Bazar could be found for an administrative headquarter. To preserve these magnificent ruins, they, however, shifted the site a few kilometers south and named it Lashkar Gah.

Within about an hour we are in midst of the vast area which is being reclaimed with the assistance of the United States. It was a pleasing sight. The canals are being dug, drains built, ground levelled and plots marked out. Some village have already been razed to the ground and a few more have been evacuated. The inhabitants have shifted to the newly constructed modern colonies.

Azim, the guide is an enthusiast. He wants us to see every bit. We have no time nor the inclination. In any case I have formed a reasonable idea of the whole development scheme and that is all I want.

Azim then takes us to the Majra settlement where a few nomadic families have been allotted land and houses. There are a few other families whose villages have been merged in the new development schemes. They have a small school in the settlement and a few ancillaries. There is also a sort

of club, a grain storehouse and a small market place.

"How do you like it here?" I ask one nomad, quietly.

So so, he says but there is much which he has left unsaid. It is obvious that he is not happy. His face clearly shows that he is looking back to his sojourns up and down the country. Even the people who have been shifted from the nearby villages do not seem to be happy. Why, I wonder. I ask them questions but their answers are vague. They do not know why they will prefer their usual unhygienic and dirty surroundings, their disease-ridden and ill-lighted mud-houses, their malaria-ridden ponds. Yet they do.

We have a similar problem in our country. If you would offer as much land as he wants to a farmer he will not accept more than a few acres. You offer him an alternative of leaving his mud-house and dirty surroundings to shift to a modern colony a few kilometers away, he would refuse. Many of us still object to vaccination and inoculation. Many of us will not accept medicine from a practitioner of modern medicine but will run to a country charlatan. A mass of people in the East are afraid of a change. Whatever has been the lot of our forefathers is good enough. Poverty, ignorance, blind faith and mental suppression spread over a period of centuries has taken away even the zest for a better life. They do dance off and on, attend fairs often, go on pilgrimages but are chary of accepting any modern form of refined cultural diversion. This is a challenge to the people in the East. We have to break this tradition of self-pity and complacency.

Azim does not bring us back till half past seven in the evening. I thank him for his brilliant guide-talk and for the use of the car of Helmand valley authority.

We find Swamy sitting by the side of his station wagon puffing at a cigarette. On seeing us he puts off his cigarette but he does not get up to greet us. In fact he turns his face to the other side. Something is wrong, I think. I go up to him.

"What is the matter Swamy?"

He gets up but just grunts.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

Still there is no answer. After a little more coaxing he tells me.

"I shall not ever come out again with *Babu Pyare Lal*."

"Why ? What has happened?"

"He is in the habit of accusing people. Says that it is he who pushed the wagon out of the Farah river while I sat comfortably at the wheel."

"Well, that is serious. He has no business to utter such words. I shall deal with him strictly. In any case I shall not bring him out again on a long trip as this one."

Immediately Swamy smiles:

"Don't tell him anything *sahib*. I will settle it with him."

Veena also laughs. I tell her:

"You are no better, Veena."

"I am small after all," says she.

KANDHAR

KANDHAR has played a momentous part in the history of modern Afghanistan. It was here that in 1747, Ahmed Shah Abdali was crowned king of Afghanistan under the title of *Dur-i-Durrani* (The Pearl of Pearls). Within three years of his reign he had extended the boundaries of his kingdom to what constitutes Afghanistan till today.

History tells us that after the break-up of the great Kushan empire rose the Ephthalites or White Huns and ruled over Bactria and the territory south of the Hindu Kush for nearly a hundred years when the indigenous people again asserted themselves. For the next three hundred years or so the country remained in a fluid state.

Whatever was left of the greatness of the civilisation and culture of the Mauryas and the Kushans in Afghanistan was destroyed by the invasions of the Arabs. In the second half of the seventh century, expeditions of varying size started reaching the Kabul valley through Sistan. Though considerable destruction was wrought yet it was not found easy to overpower the people of Hindu Kush who put up a brave fight and the issue remained undecided for many decades. The peaceful reign of Caliph Harun-al-Rashid (785-809) put an end to warfare for the time being. When, however, the power of the Caliphs waned, several dynasties gained power in Afghanistan, the best known of which is that of the Samanids.

After the Samanids an Indian ruler from the Punjab, Jai Pal, was to exercise authority upto Ghazni and Kabul valley.

In the tenth century Afghanistan embraced Islam. A Muslim convert adventurer Alptigin Ghazni formed an independent principality in and around Ghazni. His able successor Subuktagin extended his kingdom till it included the entire Kabul valley upto Koh-i-Daman. His son Mahmoud, famous in history as Mahmoud of Ghazni, became one of the most powerful kings of his age and invaded India a dozen times between 1001 and 1026. Mahmoud also extended his domain to some areas north of the Oxus.

Unfortunately the empire of Mahmoud proved to be short lived. Soon after his death it tumbled down. In 1140 Ala-ud-Din, a Ghor leader, conquered and razed to the ground the city of Ghazni. The Ghors gave way to the rising tide of the Turks but soon Ghors and Turks both were to blow away before the Mongol whirlwind. The great Chengiz Khan crossed the Oxus in 1220. Avowedly he was hunting Mohammed Shah who had come to Balkh from Bukhara. Balkh was ruined. Still standing traces of Buddhism and the newly created mosques of Islam were all destroyed. The inhabitants were massacred.

Another leaf is now turned and we find the establishment and extension of the great Moghul Empire in the land of the Hindu Kush and in India. The founder of this empire was Zahir-ud-Din Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane from his father's side and a descendant of Chengiz from his mother's side; and yet he was different from both these great but terrible men of history. Babur was brave and vigorous, adventurous and a born leader, ambitious and self-confident but unlike Tamerlane and Chengiz he was humane and a man of letters.

At the age of twelve he was turned out of his home country of Farghana and from that very time he made it his life-long ambition to retake Farghana and rule an empire based on Samarkand. For ten long years he made many sallies to Farghana and Samarkand but could not consolidate his gains. Despairing but undaunted, he then

(1501) crossed the Oxus and came south to enlist the help of some of his distant relations. As luck would have it, he soon found himself crossing the Hindu Kush and with only a handful of his intrepid followers taking possession of Kabul. The vale of Kabul exerted a deep influence on him and he had found his haven. It was fertile and hummed with the memories of many a great conqueror of the past. Yet vast and rich plains of India beckoned him and he thought he might as well emulate the example of Alexander and Tamerlane. He set out for India, therefore, in 1505 but failed to make any headway. Returning to Kabul he started extending his kingdom south and north. He captured Kandhar and in 1509 crossed the Hindu Kush and arrived at Kunduz. Here with the support of the Persians he was able to fulfil his ambition of childhood and conquered Samarkand. But by this time the Uzbeks were getting united and becoming a considerable force to reckon with. One leg of Babur was always in Kabul, the failure of his expedition to India rankling his mind. In 1514 he could not contain the Uzbeks and had to abandon to them his territory beyond the Oxus, though Faizabad and Kunduz were still in his hands and Balkh under his protection. He sent his son Humayun to look after the dominions north of Hindu Kush with Faizabad as his headquarters.

By now Babur was fairly strong in the Kabul valley and many soldiers had flocked to his banner. In 1525, therefore, he set out again for India and it is a curious fact of history that in India he was to give fight to Ibrahim Lodi, at that time the ruler of the Afghan Lodi dynasty. After defeating Ibrahim Lodi, at the famous field of Panipat on April 2, 1526, Babur set up his seat of government at Agra. Once in India he never left this country again.

After accompanying his father to India, Humayun had returned to his post and in 1529 he made another attempt to capture Samarkand but failed. Babur died in 1530 and his descendants never aspired to cross the Oxus again.

Humayun was followed by his son, Akbar the Great, who as the days passed, found that it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep a hold on the territories north of the Hindu Kush. The control on Kandhar was also costing a lot in men and material, for by this time the Persians had gained power and claimed Herat and Kandhar as their birthright. In fact in 1588 they did occupy Kandhar and it was only after 36 years that Akbar could recapture it. In 1622 it was again conquered by the Persians and it was Shah Jehan, in 1637, who regained the possession but eleven years later it was again and finally to pass out of the hands of the Mughals. In the area north of the Hindu Kush they met with no more luck. Uzbeks had overflowed their dominions and had occupied Balkh and Badakhshan in the thirties of the seventeenth century and Moghul armies had much difficulty in retaking it. In 1648 the Moghuls were finally to withdraw from this area as well.

It is now the beginning of the dissolution of the Moghul Empire and we find Aurangzeb almost helpless in stemming the tide of the Persians and the indigenous Afghan tribes. By his bigotry and over-centralisation of administration Aurangzeb had sealed the fate of Moghul Empire. He died in 1707.

The stage was now set for the advent of Persians in Afghanistan. The main actor in this scene was Nadir Quli Beg, belonging to the Afshar tribe, and born in Khurasan in 1688. Joining the forces of the Shah of Persia, Abbas III in 1726, he was to become within a brief period of five years, the most important man of the Empire. In 1732 Nadir occupied Herat and soon after that, deposing the Shah, he crowned himself the king. In 1738 Kandhar surrendered and once again the road to India lay open. Making for Ghazni and Kabul in the same year he attacked India in 1739 and captured Delhi. The following year he returned to Kandhar in 1740 and crossed the Hindu Kush to subdue the territory as far as Samarkand.

At this time Nadir was joined by a person called Ahmed Shah belonging to the Abdali tribe whom Nadir had defeated in Herat and later in Kandhar. This man had those rare qualities of personal pluck and courage which had characterised men like Babur, Chander Gupta and Alexander in the past. Ahmed became to Nadir what Nadir had become to Abbas III only a decade previously. In 1747 Nadir Shah, who by now was mentally deranged, was murdered by his Persian officer. Ahmed Shah then came to Kandhar, where by consensus of opinion of the representatives of the Abdali tribe, he was crowned king. From now on the Abdali tribe came to be known as Durrani and Ahmed Shah Abdali became Ahmed Shah Durrani.

After Kabul, Kandhar till today, is the most important town in Afghanistan. The Indian Consul here was expecting our arrival and had laid on a rice and curry Indian lunch for us. It was indeed welcome.

The next morning we went to Mundigak, a site of recent excavations. So far Veena and myself had been driving alone on such side excursions but today Pyare Lal and Swamy were both keen to come. For once, they had made it up between themselves and wanted to exhibit their solidarity before me and secondly they knew that our journey was due to end soon. To be true I found Swamy rather regretful. He confided to me :

"Within two days now we shall be back in Kabul."

"Isn't it nice?"

"It is alright *sahib*. After all I did not mind this journey."

"It has been tough. Don't you think so?"

"True but then it was interesting and enjoyable. You were kind to me".

It was just as well that they came with me for this excursion turned out to be extremely difficult. Once a steep gradient coupled with a sharp turning nearly let us down. We had to place stones behind the rear wheels to prevent

the vehicle from slipping backward when the footbrake pedal is released. The hand-brake is seldom of much use while negotiating such gradients.

When after much effort we eventually reached the general area of Mundigak we were led astray by some passerby and, on travelling eight kilometers in a river-bed, came to a dead end. It took us nearly three hours to reach the site but then we were well received by Monsicur Casal, under whose guidance the excavations were being carried out. Monsieur and Madame Casal and another French couple with approximately thirty labourers were carrying out their work with a religious zeal.

Mundigak appears to be a pre-historic village which covers the entire bronze age in thirteen stages of construction indicating the way in which the people of Arghandab valley lived nearly five thousand years ago. The latest occupation may date to 1000 or 700 B. C. Quetta designs are prominent in the pottery unearthed. There is a striking resemblance to the remains found at Harappa and Mohenjodaro in the Indus basin.

A few miles outside Kandhar is Chehil Zina or the forty steps. A flight of forty rock-cut steps leads one to a rocky cave flanked by pillars. Inside are a series of inscriptions in Persian. The cave was built in the time of King Babur though the inscriptions continued to be engraved till the reign of Humayun. The inscription names some of the towns in India which were conquered by the early Moghuls. At one corner of a central pillar I noticed an inscription in Devnagri. This intrigued me and Veena.

"When was this inscribed you think?" she asked me.

"Frankly I don't know."

"Must be after Babur."

"May be."

"But don't you know about it?"

"No."

"This is funny. You claim to have read so much of

history."

"There is nothing wrong if I don't know such details."

"There is nothing wrong. Eh !" and she grimaced.

"And get out of the habit of thinking that I know everything. I am not God Almighty," I added.

"I see that," she laughed.

I tried to decipher the inscription but could not except for a few characters. It appears that the entire inscription is the work of Indian craftsmen and the lines in Devnagri contain the names and other details of the Indian engravers.

There are only two other places of interest; the tomb of Ahmed Shah Durrani and the mosque where he was crowned the King. I also visited the Pak-Afghan border at Spin Baldak, a hundred kilometers in the east. A couple of kilometers within the Pakistan territory lies the small town of Chaman. This name brought back to me the memories of childhood. The hawkers in my home town of Jaranwala cried themselves hoarse in recounting the qualities of grapes, apples, pomegranates and melons of Chaman and Kandhar. It then appeared that Chaman and Kandhar were seven seas beyond and I shall never never see them.

In the evening the Vice Consul took me to an Afghan wedding, where he had been invited earlier. The ceremonies are akin to the ones performed in India. There was also a show of Athan, the national Afghan dance.

This dance is an important pastime which is universally loved in Afghanistan and has come down to these people through the ages. It is performed to the beat of drum. Groups of young men and women join one another in different circles, singing specially composed tunes of the Athan. After a while these groups break up and merge into larger circles who perform the Athan with increasing tempo. The tune of the song changes accordingly and towards the end the rhythmic and spectacularly fast movements of head, arms and feet is a glorious sight indeed. During my stay in Afghanistan I became a fair performer of Athan. The urge to learn Athan, which

closely resembles the Punjabi folk dance, Bhangra, is irresistible. The Afghans and particularly the Pashtuns are eager to find an occasion for its performance.

XVII

THE PAST TWO HUNDRED YEARS

WHEN I come out in the morning I heard Swamy muttering as if to himself:

"*Bap re bap*. Isn't this too early to start. I don't know why this unearthly hour be inflicted on us. After all tomorrow we shall be in Kabul."

"Shut up Swamy ! Colonel *sahib* is about to come. Your misfortunes are about to end anyhow."

"You think I am afraid of travelling *Babu Pyare Lal*. You are sadly mistaken. I wouldn't mind going twice round Afghanistan without a pause."

"Really Mister ?"

"This is no joke *Babuji*."

"Who is joking ? Anyway since you are already up and we are about to start, it is no use grumbling."

"I tell you I am not afraid. I shall even speak to the Colonel *sahib* about it."

I cough subduedly and get down the steps.

"Is everything ready ?"

"Yes sir," said Swamy, "it is just the time to start. I am sure we shall be able to cover a lot of distance before daybreak."

"I am sure Swamy. I hope you don't mind getting up at such an unearthly hour."

"Well *sahib*; it is okay by me. After all it is the last but one day."

Aside to *Pyare Lal* he said :

"Don't you say anything to the *sahib*?"

He knows full well that I have already heard all he had been saying.

We start. It is half past four in the morning. Pyare Lal asks :

"Normally travellers stop over at Mukur for the night. Why are we going on to Ghazni?"

"I want to have a lot of time at Ghazni and I want to reach Kabul by about lunch time tomorrow."

"There must be some luncheon party."

"So did Mrs. Singh tell me over the phone."

"Now I know the reason," and he nudged Swamy.

Veena is not yet really awake and I bid her to go to sleep. I cover her with a light blanket as the mornings even in May can be chilly in Kandhar. It is almost nine hundred meters high. Or is it not really chilly? With a blanket in hand, I want to show off to Prabhjot that I have been without doubt looking after Veena all through the journey.

Almost the entire stretch from Kandhar to Ghazni is barren. Not as barren as between Kandhar and Farah but barren nevertheless. Sometimes the monotonous surroundings bore me. But just then I start thinking of the past; the rich past of these parts. In spite of its surroundings this route has been a busy one for thousands of years.

When I thus inwardly gaze at the panorama I am bewitched. Every piece of stone seems to speak. Every changing scene tells a tale. Every blade of grass, if there be one, seems to say that he is proud of taking birth in this very place. Every village, house or hut beckons me to come and witness the rich treasures they conceal in their bosoms. Am I ever bored of travelling in Afghanistan? Never. Not with these sprawling episodes of history around.

The memory of Ahmed Shah for the Indians is unsavoury. It is the memory of defeat, misery and torture. I too had similar sentiments once. But when I dispassionately study the implications of the successive attacks of Ahmed

Shah over India and his cruelty towards our people, I seem to forgive him.

The standards of civilised behaviour in Central Asia till then were rather mediocre. Ahmed Shah did not behave differently to the Indians than he did in his own country to his own people. Apart from his personal courage and leadership of a high calibre there is another quality which endears him to me. He was perhaps the first King in Central Asia who selected a Council of *Sardars*, something like the present-day cabinet, to advise him and partly conduct the administration of the state.

Timur Shah, second son of Ahmed Shah, was crowned after his father's death in 1773. One of his first acts after wearing the crown was to put down a rebellion by his brother, Suleiman. The rebellion was put down but as a punishment to the people of Kandhar, who had assisted his brother, he shifted his headquarters to Kabul, which, three years later in 1776, became the official capital of the kingdom. Till Timur died in 1793, the kingdom remained disunited and the administration grew worse day by day. One after the other Afghan domains in Sind, Punjab and Kashmir became semi-independent or were now about to pass into the hands of the others.

There were twenty-three sons to compete for the throne at the time of the death of their father, Timur Shah. Zaman Shah was the one to control the reigns of the government till 1800, mostly by the support of one Painde Khan, chief of the Mohammedzai clan. In 1800 another son of Timur Shah, Mahmoud, blinded his brother, and ruled for the next three years. From 1803 onwards Shah Shujah was the ruler of Afghanistan. But in 1809 Mahmoud again wrested the throne from his brother and ruled or rather misruled till 1818, when his cousin clan rose in rebellion against him as a consequence of ill-treating their chief Fateh Khan, son of Painde Khan.

The land of the Afghans for the next eight to ten

years was to become a hot-bed of intrigues and murders. It was only in 1826 that Dost Mahammed Khan, the youngest son of Painde Khan assumed control and became the first king of the Mohammedzais, which family still rules the country.

Dost Mahammed was the best man who could have sat on the throne at Kabul. He was sagacious and had the sense to placate rather than to ride rough-shod over his near relations. He had a mature outlook and was not easily excitable. He was patient and persevering. He had the uphill task of making the diverse people of Afghanistan feel like one nation. Economy had to be rehabilitated and trade started with neighbouring countries. Dost Mahammed had also to assert the authority of the central Government in the provinces north of the Hindu Kush and in Herat. This too, among other things, he achieved to a great degree.

By now, we find the British firmly settled in India except in the Punjab. Even in the Punjab their influence was growing and intrigues against the kingdom of Ranjit Singh had started. By the policy they were following they were bound to annex Punjab sooner than later.

It is apparent that the British considered it an opportune time to start interference in the affairs of Afghanistan. The excuses were not far to seek for this was just the time when the Russians had appeared around the land of the Afghans as serious contenders of the rising British power. In 1828 they had already concluded a treaty with the Shah of Persia by which they had extended their control south of the Caucasus.

In November 1837, a Russian envoy, Vickovich, arrived in Kabul bearing a personal letter from the Czar for Amir Dost Mahammed. Captain Burns, who by this time, had also reached Kabul as an envoy of the Governor General Lord Auckland, was naturally disturbed and no doubt he conveyed his views to his master at Calcutta. The secret committee in their despatch dated 25 June 1836 had already written to Lord Auckland instructing him that it will be, "desirable for you to take

to watch more closely than has hitherto been attempted the progress of events in Afghanistan and to counteract the progress of Russian influence in a quarter which, from its proximity to our Indian possessions, could not fail if it were once established to set injuriously on the system of our Indian alliance, and possibly to interfere even with the tranquility of our own territory."

Under these circumstances, then, Lord Auckland ordered the march of the British Army to Afghanistan in October 1838 with the aim of placing Shah Shujah on the throne at Kabul. The Sikhs, under their leader, Ranjit Singh, undertook to assist the British. It cannot be denied that Ranjit Singh had a soft corner for Shah Shujah, to whom he had first given refuge nearly thirty years ago. The invading armies were jointly reviewed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Lord Auckland at Ferozepur in December 1838 with unforgettable pomp and show.

Dost Mahammed had every intention to give fight but to his utter dismay he found that quite a few of the people surrounding him would not back him up and thus, frightened and deserted by his friends, he ran away to the Koh-i-Daman and beyond to the valley of Bamian. In 1840 he appeared from the hills, gave a half-hearted battle, surrendered to the British and was escorted to India, to be used later by the British if any occasion arose, as they had previously done with Shah Shujah.

Sure enough an occasion soon arose. Shah Shujah could not win the respect of his nation nor did he remain popular with the British for long, with whom he now wanted to deal on an equal footing. Besides, the inborn love of independence which the people of Afghanistan had in full measure asserted itself and there was a general uprising against the foreigners. This was the first and extremely important uprising for it was this getting together against the *farangi* which was to weld the diverse people of this land into a nation. Shah Shujah and a number of British officers and men were murdered. On 23

December 1841 some Afghans chieftans agreed to give safe passage to the remaining British soldiers and their families but out of a total of nearly 4500 people only Dr. Brydon managed to reach Nengerhar, to tell the tale of long drawn woe and misery. In 1842 the British Army returned to Kabul and this time along they brought Dost Mohammed, who was certainly by now a much wiser and sobered king.

The rivalry between the British and the Russians continued. No doubt the British were supreme both on sea and land in a greater part of the world but they were in no mood to start an actual war with St. Petersburg, if they could avoid it. The Russians too, on their side, were eager to exploit the situation as much as possible, short of going to war with the mighty British.

Between then and 1878 there was almost no central authority in Afghanistan.

In 1880, Abdur Rehman, managed to win over a number of Afghan tribal chiefs and occupied the throne. The British concluded a treaty with him reserving to themselves the foreign affairs of Afghanistan. King Habibullah succeeded Abdur Rehman in 1901.

He maintained a neutral attitude during the First World War. At the end of the war Habibullah demanded that the peace conference should recognise the independence of Afghanistan but before anything could come of this request he was shot dead on 20th February 1919. Amanullah succeeded him on the throne.

King Amanullah is one of the outstanding geniuses of the current century. He was imaginative, vigorous, quick-witted and above all modern in his outlook. He was one of the few men in the East, who had realised as far back as the early twenties that the future of any nation or country lies in education, the adoption of scientific approach and industrialisation. He saw clearly that those nations who remained fettered with tradition and religion were going to remain standstill, they were not going to progress and would never

become truly independent. He foresaw that unless a state is based on secularism, social justice and equitable distribution of wealth, it is doomed to failure in the long run.

We must not forget that ever since the beginning of the twentieth century European nations were feeling the impact of fast moving national currents in the eastern countries. The Japanese victory over the Russians in the first decade had a moral effect on the eastern nations much bigger and greater than the victory itself justified. Here was an example to show, it was argued, that the nations of the East were no less intelligent and brave than those of the West. Only opportunities were lacking and these opportunities were now to be created. In India, the freedom movement, under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, had taken firm root and by 1919 the British Government had painfully realised that ultimately it would have to meet the aspirations of the Indian people. Undercurrents on the Chinese scene were also discouraging for the Europeans. Then came the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. It had a tremendous impact on the rank and file and freedom movements everywhere seemed to have found fresh vigour and strength.

Amanullah in Afghanistan was not unaware of these developments. In a way he was better placed than many other national leaders of the East. His country was semi-independent and his people prepared to sacrifice anything to achieve full freedom. Soon after ascending the throne, Amanullah decided to fight for winning his independence. Besides the general wave of surging nationalism in India at that moment, the Khilafat movement was in full swing and the people of India and Afghanistan lay united with those of Turkey. Not only that; Soviet Russia had also entered into an alliance with the Turks and promised support to Afghanistan in case of need. The time was propitious indeed from all angles. Amanullah succeeded in defeating the British in a small but effective Third Afghan War and forced them to conclude the treaty of Rawalpindi. Afghanistan was free.

Soviet Union was the first country to recognise this independence. Many other countries followed suit. In 1923 Amanullah promulgated a new administrative code based on a modern conception of law. In 1924 he urged his people to educate their womenfolk. This act did not find favour with the orthodox Muslims and there was a rebellion in the southern province, known in history, as the Khost rebellion. The real causes of the rebellion were tribal cliques but the moment chosen was opportune and as such it appeared that it had wider and bigger causes to uphold than merely the finale of a family feud. The Khost rebellion lasted little over nine months viz. from March 1924 to January 1925. It was ultimately suppressed but it left the central government weak and, worse, without adequate finances. Amanullah did his best to raise money through exports and internal resources but these were never adequate. On the other hand more money was needed for the reforms and economic projects which were under way.

The country had not fully recovered economically when in December 1927, King Amanullah embarked upon an extensive tour of Europe. He was away till July 1928. During this period he visited almost all the capitals of Europe and besides, Egypt and Persia. He was feted everywhere he went. The people of Europe were charmed by this exuberant King from the fabulous East. In Italy, the King presented him with the collar of Annunziata. In Germany the ruling circles made a great show of his visit. He was a guest at Buckingham Palace for three whole weeks. In Russia he received armaments and thirteen aeroplanes as gift. Kamal Ataturk acclaimed him as his brother. In Egypt he was considered a symbol of freedom against western domination. But whatever success this visit had abroad, affairs at home were not smooth, for the *Mullahs* were preaching against him everywhere and seeds of rebellion had been sown.

On return from Europe, King Amanullah once again reaffirmed his faith in revolutionising Afghanistan and making

it a modern secular state. The order was given that henceforth no woman should wear a veil in the country and, further, courtiers and officials were forced to wear European dress. There was resentment in Nengerhar and Kabul. Some tribes rose against these orders. While negotiations were going on with them, one Habibullah Khan, the son of a water carrier and a thorough brigand, emerged from the Koh-i-Daman and invaded Kabul and sealed the fate of Amanullah. On 14th January 1929, he left Kabul for Kandhar on his way abroad. Habibullah, popularly known as Baccha Saqqa, was the next ruler of Afghanistan.

Amanullah failed for no other reason than that he came to the throne almost half a century ahead of his time. That he was over-zealous, headstrong and a dreamer, no one would deny. That he did not gauge the strength of the conservative and orthodox elements in his country is also true, but no one can deny that he was patriotic to the core and extremely frugal and temperate in his personal habits.

It was obvious that Baccha Saqqa could not rule for long. Afghanistan had come a long way from the days when any menial or shepherd could rule it just because he happened to be powerful. The people of Afghanistan had emerged as a nation and their loyalties were to the house of Mohammed-zais, who had ruled the country since 1826; for Nadir Shah, the next King, was a direct descendant of Painda Khan, the father of Dost Mohammed. He was thus a kinsman of Amanullah and was at one time his Commander-in-Chief. In March 1924, he effected an entry into Afghanistan via India and along with his brothers, Shah Wali Khan, and Shah Mohamud Khan started recruiting his forces in the Eastern and Southern Provinces, in order to oust Bachha Saqqa and capture Kabul. This Shah Wali Khan succeeded in doing on 14 October 1929 and two days later Nadir Khan was proclaimed King under the title of Nadir Shah.

Nadir Shah had four brothers; Sardar Hashim Khan, Sardar Shah Wali Khan, Sardar Mohammed Aziz and Sardar

Shah Mahmud Khan. Out of these, Sardar Mohammed Aziz, is not so well known though he performed successfully the duties of an ambassador, first in Moscow and later in Berlin.

The history of Afghanistan for the next twenty five years is woven round these four brothers: Nadir Shah, Hashim Khan, Shah Wali Khan and Shah Mahmud Khan. We have in them an ideal combination of strength, courage, diplomacy and adaptability.

One of these brothers still lives, Marshal Shah Wali Khan, the Victor of Kabul. He is the most respected man of Afghanistan. It is a pleasure to meet him as I have often had the opportunity to do and to hear from him the stories of those disturbed years, when he was the principal actor on the scene. He still speaks perfect Urdu and knows India better than many Indians do.

After coming to the throne Nadir Shah declared the restitution of Islamic law in the country. The question of female education was also shelved and the rigid social code of earlier times was re-established. Gradually the central authority became supreme.

To carry out the administration in a more democratic way Nadir Shah set up a cabinet of ten members. Sardar Hashim Khan became the Prime Minister and Sardar Shah Mahmud the War Minister. The Great Assembly including 286 members representing every tribe in the country was also set up, out of which 105 members formed the National Council and 27 out of the latter, the Upper House. We must not forget that Nadir Shah himself and his brothers had travelled in India and Europe and had imbibed the spirit of the changing times. Besides, Amanullah had set in motion the democratic process and its progress could not be arrested.

While efforts were being made to consolidate the country, some dissatisfied elements also started organising themselves. The leaders of this dissatisfaction were members of the Charkhi family. Hatred for the present regime was fanned by them

on the plea, among other pleas, that Nadir Shah and his brothers had sold themselves to the *farangi*. In 1933 Nadir Shah was shot dead during a prize distribution ceremony. Thus was removed from the scene a great personage and a born administrator, who had done so much good in so short a time. His son, Zahir Shah, was proclaimed King. He rules Afghanistan till today.

Sardar Hashim Khan continued to be the Prime Minister till he died in 1917. These fourteen years, including six years of the Second World War were generally uneventful but during this period Afghanistan achieved what it needed most, internal security and cohesion.

The most noteworthy development of the War years was the sale and popularity of Afghan Karakuls in the markets of the United States. Europe was in the grip of war and India was restricting all but essential imports and thus the only country which could afford to buy luxury goods of Afghanistan was America. This dependence on America with, as a result, the development of mutual relations was to play a major part in the future of Afghanistan.

We now reach one of the most important events in the history of the world; the withdrawal of British power and the independence of India. The emancipation of India is the symbol of a new period in history. It is a symbol of the general collapse of colonialism in the East and of the emergence of Asia as a continent of vital importance in the affairs of the world. Afghanistan has played a notable part in resurgent Asia.

It is strange the way history repeats itself. A detached perspective curls up the period of decades and centuries into a few years. It appears to me that only recently King Amanullah had emancipated the womenfolk and had asked them to come out in the open without their usual *chadris*, the veils. Well, today the same revolution is being repeated. The womenfolk in this country have cast off their veil and work side by side with the menfolk.

It was such a surprise sometime ago. A young pretty girl walked into the office of the Aryana Afghan Airlines and occupied a chair with a table in front. What business had she there ? A foreign passenger indeed but why this informality ? Soon, however, they discovered that this young girl was an Afghan and was an employee of the Airlines. Kabul was astir, agog. A few days thence some more ladies were seen on the streets without their veils; the police escorts always nearby; round the corner.

The novelty, however, soon vanished and by now quite a few of them dare come out, God speed to them !

It is only four in the evening when we reach Ghazni. Amazing. We have covered a distance of three hundred and sixty-six kilometers in less than twelve hours. How is it ? The anti-climax perhaps.

XVIII

THE JOURNEY ENDS

GHAZNI, once the resplendent capital of the great empire of Emperor Mahmoud, is little more than a village. There is no imposing building—ancient or modern, nor any significant ruin. The shops stock only trinkets and nicknacks of no consequence mostly meant for the villagers who come from the surrounding countryside. Most of the houses are mud built. A fortress-like structure contains the Government offices.

The supposed tomb of Shah Mahmoud lies at a distance of about ten kilometers from the town. It is unassuming and in striking contrast to the magnificence and pomp which the Shah is famous for. The building over the tomb is not more than a hundred and fifty years old. Two brick-built towers stand in the wilderness between the present Ghazni and its old site and are known as the Towers of Victory. They are decorated with patterns such as lotus, sun-flowers and meandering creepers. The towers are supposed to commemorate the victories of Shah Mahmoud but it is not confirmed by archaeological research which reveals that they belong to a much later period than the eleventh century.

"I am disappointed," says Veena pulling a long face.

"So am I?"

"What is the reason?"

"I think Veena, that ruins are never satisfying. Perhaps you and me are made differently. You see, humanity has made such staggering progress in the past few hundred years

that no ruin of the previous era can satisfy one who believes in the unbroken evolution of human mind and ingenuity."

"I don't understand."

"What I mean is that mankind unfortunately has been exaggerating its past achievements and belittling the present. Why? I don't know. We have been saying that the Greeks and the Romans and the ancient Chinese and the Indians were great builders, painters and men of culture. The fact is that whatever they built, painted or created was good only for those people and those times. True, we don't any more build big forts or China Walls but then after all we don't any more dig in the caves as in Ajanta and Ellora and paint on stone. Man has no use of caves in these times and we can preserve our works of art better by other means. Our genius manifests itself in different facets suitable to the conditions in which we live. World has travelled a long way from the times when kings and emperors, with slave labour on starvation diet, constructed amphitheatres, palaces and castles, solely for their pleasure. The common people today will not allow such criminal extravagance to their kings and presidents and prime ministers. The emphasis is on utility, and rightly too."

"Papa, I don't understand."

I was sorry to inflict this long speech upon young Veena but, in fact, I was half talking to myself. I was thinking whether some of our writers, poets, half-baked philosophers, theologians, reformers and above all the clergy and the preachers have not made too much of the past generations? They have glorified them. They have always shown them as infinitely better people than the present generations in every-way. They were kind-hearted, truthful, sympathetic and so on. The present generation has been exhorted to emulate their examples. Well, so far so good. But these pleaders of the dead go farther. They even assert that the ancients were better scientists, painters and writers. I have come to believe that it is a myth. Man was never more intelligent and

capable than today. He has never constructed or created anything in the past which could stand comparison to the constructions and creations of today. Man has never lived better, never was even more humane, kind and just as he is today.

The glory of Ghazni has been over-rated just as the glory of all the ancients, whether Indian, Chinese, Greek, Germans or Egyptians.

Veena did not understand my monologue and she said so. Nevertheless she had caught my meaning :

"But then the ruins of Surkh Kotal and of Lashkar Gah were not duds."

"Yes, that is true. They were not duds. But Veena, we mustn't live in the past. We must live in the future."

"Then why did you undertake this journey?"

"It was all in the past, eh?"

"Wasn't it. What of Bamian or Balkh, of Herat and Kandhar?"

"You are right. But we have also to understand the past. Only we should't glorify it. We, in the East unfortunately, lay more emphasis on it."

"There is nothing wrong in it. Everyone says that people living in the past centuries were better. No thefts, no lies. So do our teachers tell us."

"I don't know how you and I can break with such beliefs?"

"Why break?"

"Why not?"

"Don't ask silly questions papa?"

"Well, I shan't daughter!"

For sometime during the journey from Ghazni to Kabul I keep on musing on this. I and my family have enjoyed our stay in this country. During our extensive sojourns in different parts of Afghanistan we have always discussed what lay under these bare mountains. We have wondered and discussed and all of us have always argued that there is

bound to be a colossal fund of mineral and other wealth hidden beneath them. The awe and reverence which is inspired by these mountains cannot but be for some unknown power and beauty beneath. This country has a rich heritage. But heritage alone will not help them. I hope to see a day when, by the application of atomic energy to the inaccessible mountains of this land the riches underneath may be utilised. I hope to see a day when all the hills and dales of Afghanistan will be gloriously bright with electric lights and when to travel by day and night, on her network of mountain roads will be sheer delight.

Today, however, we jolt along on our way to Kabul at the speed of thirty kilometers an hour. Pyare Lal and Swamy both are in good spirits. There is something in this country which is irresistible. Whatever status in life and whatever level of intelligence one has his own reasons to wistfully look back to the days spent here. For us Indians the most memorable aspect is the snow. We do not see much of it in our country. Few inhabit the high northern regions and who would care to visit the hill stations in the winter. It is in the summer months that we like to run to the hills. In Kabul there is snow for four months in a year. Four long winter months.

Sitting in the rear Pyare Lal and Swamy are talking about Afghanistan. They have first discussed the discomforts one encounters here. Discomforts of unhygienic conditions, unfiltered water, bad roads, bad lighting and rising prices. But they do not discuss it for long. No one does. Inevitably they talk of the points which have charmed them in this land. Everyone must talk of the charms. Pyare Lal, a Punjabi, says:

"You are a driver and you must talk of bad roads and hopeless repair facilities but what about the fruits of Afghanistan. Aren't they in plenty and cheap. Healthy too."

"Pure blood. Aren't they?"

"Of course!"

"You Punjabis are always after pure this and pure that."

"And what are you people after?"

"Nothing in particular. We people live a normal healthy life. But if you ask me *Babuji*, my weakness are the pretty girls of Afghanistan. *Bap re bap*, such beauties can never exist anywhere on the surface of this earth."

"Shut up. Who will care to look at your soot coloured face?"

"Nevertheless..."

"Don't you talk anymore nonsense. Yes, another thing that I like is the hospitality of these people. My God, if in our town..."

So the conversation goes on.

Forty kilometers short of Kabul the dynamo stops charging. We have been lucky ever since Farah and are not at all upset at this mishap. I am no mechanic and Swamy is not much good either, but one can never get held up on highways in Afghanistan for minor things like the present one. Any passing driver will stop his truck and will help you as a matter of honour. They repair anything except of course the damaged radiator. So long the armature is not burnt the dynamo will definitely start charging. While we were still fiddling about, another station wagon comes to halt near us. Out come half a dozen Afghans.

"What is the trouble," the driver asks.

Swamy narrates.

"Let me have a look!" and he starts.

I know the job will be done. We will be in Kabul for lunch for certain.

My mind wanders over this long journey and many other shorter trips I have made. I am reminded of an incident. It happened between Pul-i-Khumri and Mazar-i-Sharif. I have not forgotten it since. Indeed I shall never forget it. This is one of my cherished memories of Afghanistan.

My wife, Swamy and myself had left Pul-i-Khumri about three hours ago and were in the midst of a barren tract. It was

nearing two in the afternoon and we had been wanting to have our lunch for the past half an hour. But for nearly fifteen kilometers we had not come across a single tree. We had to look out for one. We could not sit out in the sun and eat. Eventually we saw a tree in the distance. We cheered up. Yes, there were a few trees and besides them a hut which must have been a tea-shop once. Now, however, it was empty. Three Afghans sat in the shade eating *nan* with bits of onion. We parked our wagon, got down and started chatting with the Afghans. The water in the thermos flask could not be wasted for washing the hands which we desperately wanted to do. We had had to change the spare wheel and had to take the black stains off. We asked if any water was around. No, there was none. The nearest place where we could have some was three kilometers away.*

We opened our haversack lunch and during the course of conversation one of the Afghans asked:

"Have you got such high mountains in India?" and he pointed to the range of the Hindu Kush in front.

"Yes," I said humbly, "the Hindu Kush is only an offshoot of the Himalayas of India."

"I see," the other one said, "have you got such nice fruit in India as we have here?"

"Well..." I answered hesitatingly, "we have a wide variety of fruit and in plenty."

"Have you got a garden as good as in Paghman, near Kabul?"

"Paghman is good but there are some like it in India too."

One of them then asked:

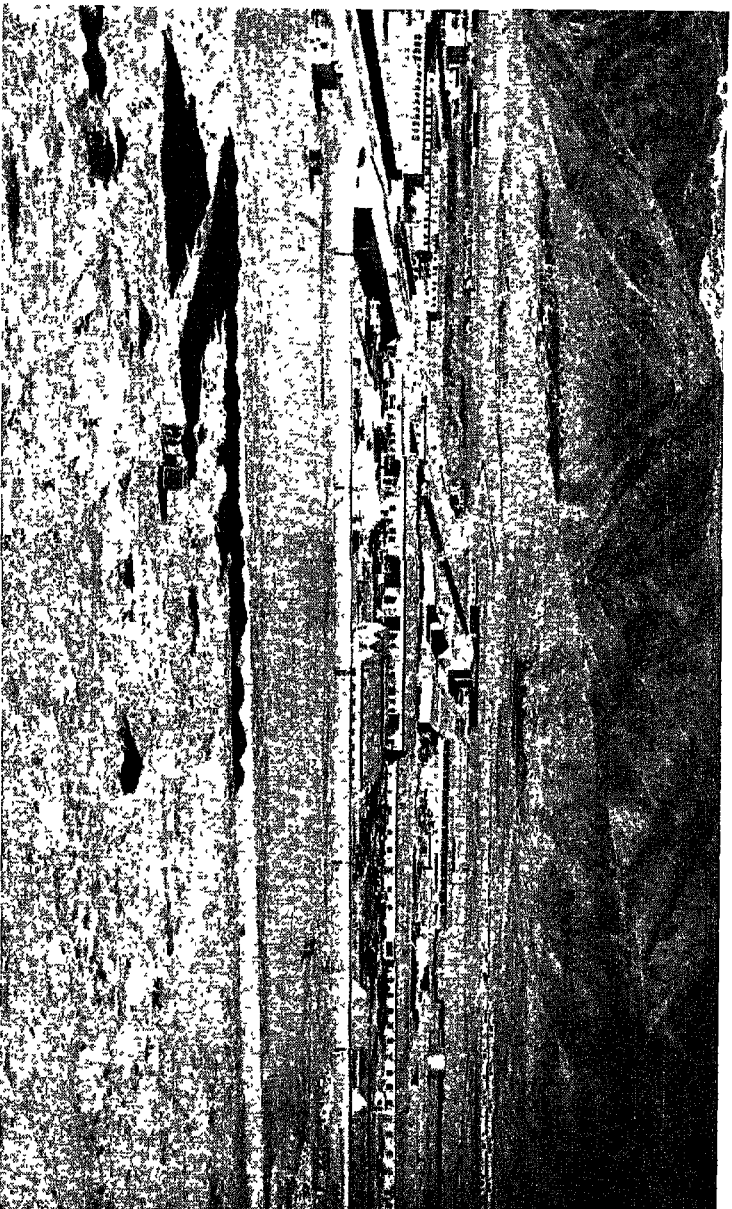
"Is there a city as large as Kabul?"

"Kabul is certainly big and beautiful," I was apologetic, "but Calcutta could really contain ten towns of the size of Kabul."

They did not believe me and the Afghan who had started the conversation defiantly said:

"May be it is true but even then there is no other country like Afghanistan."

I smiled and agreed.



An aerial view of textile mill at Gulbahar